Ms 3525

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INTERVIEW WITH MARION BROWN SILLS, LABOR ORGANIZER AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Conducted by Sue Cobble
Summer and Fall, 1977

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CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Marion Brown Sills, selected as an interviewee by the California Historical Society for their Oral History Project with women labor activists and organizers in California, was an essential part of the organizing and founding of the Department Store Employees, Local 1100 of the Retail Clerks International Union. Ms. Sills served as the union's first business agent in the late thirties. During the forties and fifties Sills continued as a principal leader and formulator of policy in the union while working behind the counter as a saleswoman at the Emporium and other department stores in San Francisco. Sills also worked as a machinist during World War II and was President of Local 1100 Retirees Club. Presently, Sills is active in the Congress of California Seniors.

Conduct of the Interview:

The first four interviews were conducted at the Sills's home in San Francisco during the summer and fall of 1977. Sills was reluctant at first to participate in the project; she supported the project and its goals yet was worried that her memory would not supply her with the necessary details and insights. However, once the chronology and factual data was gleaned from written documents and used as a framework for the interview, Sills brought the story to its full descriptive richness as the interviews that follow demonstrate.

Narrative account of the Interview:

The interview follows fairly closely the chronology of Marion Sills own life. She begins with her family background, her early life and adolescence in San Francisco and her first sales job after graduating from Mission High School. The second interview focuses on Sills's role in the founding and early development of the Department Store Employees. In interview three, Sills continues the story of the early strikes and negotiating struggles of the union and discusses quite explicitly her role in the Communist Party and the effect of her political commitment on her trade union work. Sills, in interview four, touches on her marriage and her family, her own socialization as a woman and the impact her background and sex had on her work. Sills's work as a machinist during World War II and her subsequent return to department store employment is also discussed. In concluding, Sills reminiscences in general terms about the meaning of her commitments to labor and political work and the personal and political choices she made during the course of her life.

Editing:

The editing was minimal and done by both the interviewer and Ms. Sills.

Photographs in Portrait and/or Photograph Collection

Ephemera in MSS Box

Sue Cobble, Interviewer
October, 1978

Chronology for Marion Brown Sills

May 13, 1916	Born Oakland, California
1934	Graduated from Mission High School, S F.
1934-36	Sales clerk at Woolworth's Department Store, Fifth & Market, San Francisco.
1936	Warehousemen (I.L.W.U) organize for recognition strike at Woolworth's; organizing begun in the department stores.
April 7,1937	Department Store Employees, Local 1100 of the Retail Clerks International receive their charter; Sills elected as the first Business Agent for the Local.
1937-41	Sills works as a Business Agent and also as a general office worker for the union.
World War II	Work as a machinist in International Association of Machinists, Local 68 (Tool and Die Makers); Office Clerk for the US Air Force.
1947-49	Saleswork at the Emporium
1951-59	Saleswork at other department stores
1959-67	Work for her husband's general contracting firm.
1968-70	Manager of Glenridge Housing Development.

MILLERS FALLS
ERASE
COTTON CONTENT

For the genealogical division

STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON _____

For the California Historical Society
Women in California Collection Oral History Interview

Name Marion Brown Sills Date of birth May 13, 1916

Place of birth Oakland, California

Name of husband or wife Ben Sills

Date of marriage 6/21/41 Place of marriage Reno, Nevada

Parents

Mother (maiden name) Anna Davidson

Where born Russia Date of birth _____

Date of death _____

Father's name Louis Brown Date of birth _____

Where born _____ Date of death _____

Date of marriage _____ Place of marriage _____

Grandparents

Mother's side Name of father _____

Date of birth _____ Date of death _____

Name of mother(maiden) _____

Date of birth _____ Date of death _____

Father's side Name of father _____

Date of birth _____ Date of death _____

Name of mother (maiden) _____

Date of birth _____ Date of death _____

My brothers and/or sisters

Name Gus Brown Date of birth June 30, 1911

Name Natalie Christenson Date of birth February 5, 1919

Name _____ Date of birth _____

Comments _____

_____

(use other side if necessary)

San Francisco Edition

Northern California Labor

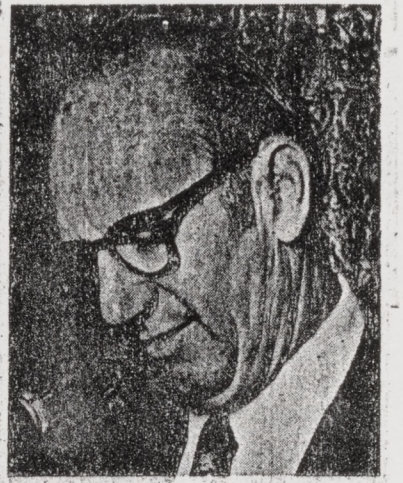
with Local 1100 REPORT

Vol. 22, No. 3 | San Francisco Labor Council, AFL-CIO | Santa Clara County Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO | 151 | July 13, 1973

See page 5

Local 1100 retirees gather around as Rev. Edward Peet, regional board member, presents charter of affiliation with National Council of Senior Citizens: (left to right) Ruth Von Soosten, Bessie Hilsz, Leona Graves, Charles Moury, Marion Sills, Marjorie Sullivan, Rev. Peet, Leo Kowski, Mary Kaplan.

Local 1100 members, both active and retired, took a prominent role in the recent Congressional district conventions which chose delegates to the upcoming Democratic Charter Convention in Kansas City. Coordinator Bill Aldrich, assisted by Susan Monaghan, and the Retirees' Club Marian Sills were responsible for a turnout of 35 active and retired Local 1100 members to the district sessions. And the Local 1100 delegation had a hand in electing labor representatives in both the 5th and 6th Congressional three-member slates: Mattie Jackson, of the Int. Ladies Garment Workers Union in the 5th; Timothy J. Twomey of Hospital Workers, Local 250 in the 6th. Angie Alarcon, formerly an active unionist and now an active aide to State Sen. George Moscone, is also a member of the 6th District delegation.



Among those who spoke to the Northern California-wide session that drew more than 200 Retail Clerks' retirees were (left to right): Ray Stubblefield, director of the RCIA's community services department, who acted as master of ceremonies of the session; Marion Sills, president of Local 1100 Retirees Club; John Blaiotta, president of the Local 428, San Jose, Retirees Club, and a onetime secretary of Local 1100; Roy Penn, Local 373, Vallejo.

San Francisco Edition

Northern California Labor

with Local 1100 REPORT

September 12, 1975

San Francisco Labor Council, AFL-CIO
Santa Clara County Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO

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Vol. 24, No. 5

CONGRESS OF CALIFORNIA SENIORS

Post-Convention up-date

The recent Founding Convention in Fresno was an indication of the concern of thousands of Senior Californians for the failure of our legislative bodies to recognize the social and economic needs of the elderly and the community at large.

The Convention set new goals, elected officers, a state-wide Executive Board of Regional and Area Leaders to assure grass-roots representation in the policy and decision making process.

CONVENTION ACTION

(1) Adopted a broad-based policy statement on income.

(2) Adopted strong Medicare amendments to up-grade long-term health care and enforcement of Nursing Home regulations.

(3) Sent Telegrams to Governor Brown urging a special session of the legislature to cope with the economic problems resulting from ever-increasing property taxes, and the related need for relief for the renter.

(4) All out support for a strong General Assistance bill for the unfortunate, elderly and disabled.

(5) Adopted an agressive resolution providing for housing for the elderly and low income families.

Six other resolutions were referred to the Executive Board for action at a time commensurate with consideration of the subject matter by the appropriate legislative committees.

Your officers met November 9 and are presently scheduling a series of meetings and consultations in preparation for the reconvening of the legislature. THE MACHINERY IS NOW IN MOTION.

THE HEADQUARTERS OFFICE ADDRESS IS:

The Congress of California Seniors
1107 - 9th Street, Suite 313
Sacramento, CA 95814 Telephone (916) 442-4474

The success of this state-wide unified effort depends on the participation and cooperation of each club; or organization. We are encouraged by the number of applications for affiliation in our daily mail. We are counting on you too!

THE CONGRESS OF CALIFORNIA SENIORS
1107 9th Street, #313
Sacramento, California 95814
(916) 442-4472

AN INVITATION TO AFFILIATE

Your Organization of Seniors is invited to join our newly organized Congress of California Seniors. The Congress was organized following a state-wide meeting in Sacramento among many clubs, chapters and groups where the need for a state wide continuing organization was expressed.

The objectives and principles of the Congress are as follows:

1. To promote the interest of California senior citizens in Local, State and Federal concerns.
2. To encourage greater opportunities for civic service by senior citizens.
3. To act as a clearing house for the exchange of information, ideas and experiences among affiliated members and groups.
4. To engage in fact finding and analysis of issues, to publish the results of such studies, to provide a responsible and articulate voice for senior citizens and to conduct other types of public relations activities.
5. To promote life-long education of the highest quality for senior citizens through lecture courses, institutes, workshops and other types of learning programs.
6. To be non-profit, non partisan and to promote social welfare by assuming the role of advocate to influence appropriate legislation and take such other lawful action as necessary for the implementation of the objectives and principles set forth herein.

MEMBERSHIP

Any Senior Citizens club or any other organization whose objective is to serve the economic, educational, spiritual or social needs of California Seniors may apply for affiliation regardless of color, ethnic background, creed, religion or national orgin. Affiliation is voluntary. The identity, autonomy and freedom of political choice of all affiliates shall be retained, recognized and guaranteed.

DUES

The annual dues are graduated as follows:

250 members or less	$10.00
251 to 1000	$25.00
1001 and over	$50.00

Special Note: Dues cover a calendar year. Dues paid during 1977 will pay for the entire calendar year of 1978.

USE THIS FOR AFFILIATION

CLUB NAME _____

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YOUR NAME _____ PHONE: _____

YOUR ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ ZIP ___

Approximate number of members _____ Amount Enclosed _____. Please make check payable to Congress of California Seniors. Mail to address at top of page.

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Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview: Marion Brown Sills
Date of Interview: June 27, 1977, at home of Mrs. Sills, 2416, 15th Street, San Francisco, Calif.
Interviewer: Sue Cobble
Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin, Tape #1 - Counter #1 Page one

Sills: In terms of family background, I knew my mothers family a bit - not too much. She had four brothers. There were four brothers and two sisters. The brothers came to America first. And they all became business men of one sort or another. There was only one brother who wasn't in business himself. And they became rather successful. They were in the jewelry business. Diamonds, I think, was one of the things. Jewelry and luggage.

As soon as they could, they sent for their sisters. And they were right on the border. They lived in this little town, I don't remember the name of it, on the border between Russia and Poland. And the oppression that existed there as far as the young men were concerned (they were drafted into the army) probably was one of the main reasons they left their mother and father there. They never came over.

My mother was illiterate. She couldn't read or write. She came over here and she got married and she never spoke about her background. You know, sometimes at family gatherings we would all talk a little bit and ask questions.But there didn't seem to be - She didn't tell us amything about what happened, why she left.

She told us funny stories. When she came

Sills: to this country and landed here first and they handed her a banana and thought she never saw it. But she fooled them. She had seen a banana. She told little tales like that. But never anything of an instruction.

Her marriage wasn't very much. My father left when we were very young. And he is an alcoholic. He became an alcoholic. I don't know why. She never talked about it. He left, and I dimly remember my sister and I - there is a spread between us. My brother is five years older than I am. My sister is three years younger. So there is quite a spread between the three of us.

He loved my brother, but he disliked both of us. You know, the two girls, Natalie and myself. And we always knew - The one thing I remember one incident that might relate it. He came home drunk one time and we asked him for some pennies and he wouldn't give us any money at all. But he went out in the street and threw the money away. I remember that. That never left my memory, that particular incident. And it must have been a terrifying situation, physically terrifying. But I don't recall any of the details. Anyway, he left and he never came back, and we never saw him again. But he used to keep in touch with my brother and some relatives on his side. But not for too long. And we don't know when he died or whatever happened to him.

So my mother was helped by her brothers. They really helped her.

My brother was about twelve years old. He was selling newspapers. And he was a very - He left school very early and got many jobs in different fields. He was very bright, self educated. He was a union organizer in

Sills: Los Angeles. He organized the furniture workers. For many years he was one of the officials in the furniture workers there. He is now a business man. He developed a medical plan for the furniture workers. When he left the union altogether, left the trade union movement, he established this health maintenance group. He had this plan in effect and it was private plan for people to get medical care, an insurance plan, I guess. I don't really know the details. I didn't pay too much attention.

Anyway, his story, if you ever want to hear a story, he was under seige during the McCarthy days by the government, by the city, by everybody you could think of. And he withstood the whole thing. He had a tremendous ability to - flexibility. And he maintained his position in the union all during that time. They were just trying to throw him out of the labor movement. So he has quite a story to tell.

He is sixty six this year, and I told him that he should do some, write it down at least. But he hasn't done it.

Cobble: Did your mother ever talk about what they did?

Sills: No. See, that's what I don't know. And I've questioned say, my cousins, and they don't know either. That's a funny thing. That they never talked about their past except on some occasions when they talked about little incidents that happened or what town they came from, and so forth. But I remember my mother used to say not too much. She would clam up when I would ask.

One of the things that I remember about my childhood, one of the thing that was difficult, was that whenever I came home from school or asked a question - She was religious in the sense that she practiced her religion. But

Sills: it came more and more reform and not too involved, except on holidays. And teaching us. Sending us to Hebrew school. But I remember not having anybody to answer questions. And here we were growing up in a culture alien to my mother; that she wasn't a part of although she did become, you know, integrated. But in a very limited way because being at home all the time and taking care of the family. She was family oriented.

I remember that I was a very curious kid but never had anybody to answer my questions which, as I look back, I think about.

Cobble: Do you think she didn't want you to know about the past. Like it was something she was ashamed of?

Sills: I don't know. I thought that could be possible, but I don't know. She never spoke about my father. My sister remembers my mother used to say, "Dom't ever trust a man." [laughs] That kind of thing because she was so bitter about her experience with her marriage, and the alcoholism. It was quite unusual. He was a tailor by trade.

Cobble: Was he Jewish?

Sills: Yes, he was Jewish. And it was very unusual that there was any alcoholism in Jewish families.

We were the only poor ones, the financial part of the family. The rest of them prospered and became, in some cases, one brother, quite wealthy.

Oh, I remember the one thing that we used to enjoy. We didn't like Hebrew school, but the YMHA* was very interesting. And I remember one instance particularly. Yehudi Menuhin's father was head of the Hebrew school when we went to it. And I remember once (we He

* Young Men's Hebrew Association, forerunner of Jewish Community Centers

Sills: lived on Steiner Street) I was sent over with a message to deliver to his wife, I guess. I remember Menuhin practicing in the back room. He never came out. He was always involved with his music. We never saw very much of him in the activities of his father's school.

My sister and I became very good athletes because of our connections with, it was called the Young Men's Hebrew Association.

Cobble: Was this in San Francisco?

Sills: This was in San Francisco. We were aaaociated with that and we used to tumble, and learned all kinds of games. And we went to summer camp. And the camp still exists. Camp Tawonga. When it first opened we were in three or four locations because they moved it around. Sometimes they had the use of private property. Then I remember at Lake Tahoe, and in Nevada. During the summer we were up there for two weeks.

So our whole life was, except for the real trauma of not having a father - we had a close relationship with my mother's sister and her brothers. We saw her sister quite often.

And then growing up I became very American. There was a gap between...

Cobble: You and your mother?

Sills: Right. There was a gap.

Cobble: What kinds of things were different?

Sills: What our interests were, I think, was different. I liked to play tennis. I remember in Junior High I used to go to Golden Gate Park. We lived over on Page Street. I used to go to Golden Gate Park before school and play a set or two of tennis, I had a terrific amount of energy. I was an energetic kid. And sports was a good outlet for that kind of thing.

Sills: But I don't recall having ever made a close friendship in the lower (like I went to John Swett , elementary school, and then junior high). Until I got into junior high, I didn't have any real close friends. I remember after I began to develop friends, close friends, I was always over at their house. They never came to my place. And so it was a question there of an attitude of shame because we were always, we never had anything. We had no upward mobility in terms of family. We just always got by. As a matter of fact I marvel at how she was able to feed us so well on practically nothing.

She was here during the earthquake, and lost everything and lived in Golden Gate park for about three weeks]laughs].

Cobble: Did you ever talk to your mother about that?

Sills: No. You see the relationship was always kind of a formal - a <u>warm</u> relationship, but not a <u>close</u> relationship.

We saw our uncles on special occasions. And if we were invited somewhere and they were going to pick us up in a car or something my mother would take us over to another nice looking house for them to pick us up so they wouldn't know - because we lived what is now a slum area, a little alley right back of the City Hall. So she would have this terrific pride, I guess you would call it, and a dignity in not letting them know that we were living this way. I don't know the explanation for it. But I remember it. And it had an effect on us kids. I'm sure it had an effect on a feeling of deprivation, you know.

Cobble; Maybe that you were different.

Sills: Yes. Probably.

Cobble: But the whole family came together, came

Cobble: over from Russia. Like all the brothers and sisters?

Sills: Yes, they all came here. That's right.

Cobble: And did they come to New York?

Sills: That's what I don't know. They must have come to New York first, and then they came out here. What I think is that one brother came. And then when he (this is what I think. I don't know if it's true) made it or whatever, then he sent for another brother. But they didn't stay in New York. They all came out here because the uncle that I had most contact with that was a partner in a jewelry store in Oakland, there since 1800, that was the uncle that did the most to help. He really practically supported us, I'm sure, for most of the time.

And then the others I didn't know too well. A couple of them died and one lived with us. He was the one who, he was the scholar and the poet and he was the one like, you might say he was the one that was the intellectual of the group. And he was also the other poor member of the family. He lived with us for a while and he was supported by his brothers. He was an insurance salesman. He was never successful at financial endeavors. But his bent was for reading and intellectual pursuits. And he lived with us for quite a while. And he had a daughter of his own.

Cobble: Did your mother ever give you a sense that she regretted being here or -

Sills: No. I think she liked being here. I never got a sense that she regretted being here. But as I say, she didn't communicated in this respect which I never realized at the time. But now

Sills: I feel sad about it because if I had some way of being aware of how important this was, I would have asked her questions, and maybe would have gotten an answer. There was that kind of relationship.

Between my brother and I, say there was five years, so that he had different friends. I had different friends, and my younger sister had different friends. So that we all went in different directions.

Cobble: You were born in Oakland?

Sills: Yes. I was born in Oakland, but came over here about six weeks after. We have lived in San Francisco all the time. Some of her [my mother's] brothers lived across the bay, and her sister lived here. Most of the family lived across the bay. One, but I never knew him very well - he was also very wealthy member of the family. And we lost track of my cousins. There was a complete separation there.

Cobble: What was the first neighborhood like that you lived in?

Sills: It was right down in back of City Hall in a little alley called Birch Avenue. And there was a horse stable. I remember the horse stable across the street; and I remember that the kids always played out in the street. And we would be very, I used to be very active jumping rope, sort of a tomboy, you know. Really played all kinds of games. We used to get boxes and build clubhouses. There were a lot of kids in the area so we had playmates. It wasn't a question of being completely isolated. But as far as closeness in terms of relationship, it never existed. It was always kind of separate.

Cobble: What was the background of the kids in your neighborhood?

Sills: For one thing, they were all poor kids. But we never realized it. It was never discussed

Sills: as it is now, like with people on welfare there is a certain stigma attached. There was never any stigma in terms of poverty that we felt except for the exclusion of certain social circles, in terms of social activity. I don't remember ever being integrated with others out of the neighborhood. We more or less stayed in the neighborhood.

Cobble: Did your mother have friends in the neighborhood?

Sills: She had friends, and in the neighborood some, and some outside the neighborhood. I remember one of her friends was way out in the sand dunes. We used to love to go out there. You know there was no housing in the Richmond. She had a little house way out there. She was a good friend.

And we were healthy kids. We didn't have any medical problems. We got taken care of. I think the only difficulty we had was - I had appendicitis when I was about thirteen, I guess, twelve or thirteen. And I remember my mother crying. They wouldn't take me in the hospital because of some technicality - at Mt. Zion. And finally they took me and finally they took me and operated on me. And I almost didn't make it because peritonitis had set in. But she just put up such a fuss that they took me in. But I don't know what happend. Maybe they wanted her to make some kind of a payment, or something. I don't know what. But That's the only illness I recall.

And then when I started to go to high school I made some close friends, but it was on a social basis. They were - I was supposed to go to Lowell and I said I didn't want to go to Lowell because all my friends went to Mission. So I was allowed to go to Mission High. It was

Sills: a social relationship that kids go through in high school. I suppose it is typical. So I never had any real - I used to do a lot of reading when I was a kid, but a lot of junk reading. It wasn't directed. But I loved to read. I had a library card, and I used to read all the time.

Cobble: Did your mother work?

Sills: She never worked.

Cobble: Did she ever explain to you about the finances, how you were getting by?

Sills: Never. Not a word. Not a word. It was never discussed. I knew this when I grew up and found out about it. But never as a child. Of course we used to know there was something wrong because we would never get things. We would get hand me downs and stuff like that. But you know you don't pay much attention to it. At least I don't think I did. But it must have had its affect in terms of -

Cobble: How old were you when your father left?

Sills: Around five or six.

Cobble: So you don't remember him?

Sills: I don't remember him at all.

Cobble: Did your brother ever talk about him?

Sills: I used to ask Gus [my brother] questions, and he was very reluctant also. He would just sort of brush it aside.

Cobble: You said he was a tailor.[your father]

Sills: Yes. My brother was like a father to us. I remember he bought me my first car when I was about seventeen. He bought me one of those old Chevrolets, and taught me how to drive. But we were never close, like a brother-sister relationship. It wasn't a close relationship because of the age, and because of the experiences. You see he was brought up into the business

Sills: world very young, at fourteen. He probably quit school at fourteen or twelve. I am not sure. He also read a great deal. But I don't remember a sister-brother relationship.

With my sister, I did. She was three years younger.

So that's about it. Outside of the fact that it was a broken home and I am sure it made difficulties for us, but I don't remember anything particularly about it.

Cobble: You were Americanized, but did your mother -

Sills: My mother wanted me to go to Hebrew school, and I remember I didn't particularly take to it, and I used to climb out the window.

And I used to do things that to her were different. She wanted me to conform more or less along a certain pattern. But I never - from very early I wasn't a conformist. But I didn't want to hurt her feelings, so sometimes I wouldn't tell her a lot of things. I wouldn't tell her things I had done like smoking [laughs] when I was in high school. You know, things like that. Nothing very significant. But to her it would be.

Cobble: In what ways was she not Americanized?

Sills: I think she spoke with a little accent. I think it was simply that she wasn't literate and she didn't participate in trying to go to school or anything. Her whole life was a very circumspect type of thing. I think that's more of the separation. Not so much the Americanization. We used to see families that went on vacations together and did things together, and I think I always wished I had a family like that where the mother could answer questions. I think it was that kind of a - so that we grew up saying we don't want to be Jewish. We want to be American, or

Sills: anything. We probably went overboard in that direction.

Cobble: The children?

Sills: The children - to become acceptable here. I don't remember -

End of tape - side one

Begin tape - side two

Counter #1

Sills: Differences were probably cultural. The cultural differences separated us when I speak in terms of Americanization.

Cobble: And one was the religion?

Sills: Yes. The religion.

Cobble: She was a religious woman?

Sills: Not fanatically so. And later she became more reformed. She used to go through the whole ritual of Sabbath and changing of dishes. And then she dropped that later for a reformed type of religion where she went to Synagogue maybe on the nolidays. And maybe she did go during the week, once a week or so. I don't know. On Saturday, I think she did, when we were very little.

Cobble: Was her religion very important to you?

Sills: No. I think I resisted becoming part of the whole ritual. I learned some things in Hebrew school because I was forced to go. And I remember when the family used to get together we would sing songs and so forth. And the Passover holidays and so forth would be very joyous occasions. We kept that tradition for quite a qhile until we got to be teenagers. Then, even napkins. We didn't have that anymore. So we became integrated, I would say, into the San Francisco society as it existed in those days.

Sills: Let's see. I knew after high school I would have to get some KIND OF JOB - I was never a good student. Just an average. I would get all C's mostly. A few B's. As I look back, I resented the fact that there were two tracks. You were very early put in one track or the other. Either you were to go on to college - you had the sort of family background and impetus to go towards scholarship. Although our family - we had some knowledge of how important this was. But none of us were ever the exceptionally bright kid who, from a poor family,got pulled into the college track. They just didn't have the resources. I feel there was a lot of attention paid to- I feel deprived you know. Really now, as I look back, Then I didn't know anything about it.But getting the kind of education that would mean being equipped to have some of the jobs that were much more interesting and fulfilling. Now I see that. In those days I didn't care one way or another. I never knew anything about it, other than the fact that this existed. But as I look back I can see that this was in the school system. Unless you were exceptionally bright - you see teachers have a tendency to be drawn, naturally, to the kids who are the brightest.

Cobble: To show they were doing a good job teaching?

Sills: Yes. So when I graduated I knew I had to go to work. I had some friends, who one of their sons was opening a Five and Ten Cent Store. And he gave me a summer job during the last year of my high school, in 1934. You know it was fine. And then when I graduated, it was in the hieghth of the depression and jobs were very hard to come by. So I went down to Woolworth Company and put in an application and got hired because of my previous summer experience working in the store. So from 1935 through 1936 ~~when the union~~

Sills: when the union activity began I worked two years, I remember. And I had boy friends and dating. And I didn't have any particular outside interest in what was going on in the world, or politics, or anything. No connection to it, I would say. I wouldn't say no interest. I would say no connection to it.

So that when the Warehousemen in 1936 began to organize their first warehouse uptown in San Francisco, which was the Woolworth warehouse; and when the employers refused to recognize them as an organization they went out on strike. And they came to the store with a picket line to publicize their strike and what it was all about. Until then I had absolutely no idea there was such a thing as a labor movement, or anything else about the world. You know I was very naive. So that when I became aware; when I got fired for going to the union meeting that was called to explain to the people why the strike was called and to ask for their support - then I was outraged. That here I was, a very competent worker who had been there two years, and that this could happen to me just like that. Then I hung around the labor people. I became what you would call a groupie now [laughs]. I used to hang around. And they were all men. You see there were very few women. There were a couple of women that I got to know. And one of them was Jenny Matyas from the ILGWU. And the other one was Carmen Lucia who helped us a great deal. She was an International organizer for the Millinery Workers. These two women came from back East and were sent by the International to run, or become part of the leadership of the local. So the labor movement consisted of all men, and a lot of older men to a great extent. Then I began to see that there was a

Sills: different world. And I began to understand through the discussion and through the activity in trying to organize the union. You see, we worked underground for about six months because we knew that there was a great fear. After we got fired, we knew it could happen to anybody who stuck their neck out. So we worked very quietly. We got names of people in various stores, and we used to see them outside of the store. That's how we developed the idea of leaflets, leaflet distributions, which we did for a long period of time before we came out for an open meeting.

Cobble: Marion. I have a lot of questions about that period. I would like to go back.

Sills: Sure.

Cobble: I want to ask you questions about your family. I want to get a better sense of your mother's personality.

Sills: She was a warm, sweet person, a good person. But didn't know anything. Completely ignorant about the world and anything else.

Cobble: Did she have any ambitions for herself?

Sills: If she did we never knew about it. And even when we became older we never knew. It seems like a sad thing because, like anybody else, she might have had talents that just never saw the light of day. She never had an opportunity.

Cobble: How did she feel about her life?

Sills: There was a certain bitterness about men is all I remember. But it wasn't directed against us kids, or anybody. She was just a very conscientious person, and struggled to keep us healthy and clothed. This was where her life was. And a few friends. This was where she spent her time and effort.

Cobble: Was she interested in politics at all?

Sills: I never knew. She might have been later when

Sills: we got involved and we would talk about what we were doing, and so forth and so on.

Cobble: Did she have any interests outside of home?

Sills: No.

Cobble: That took up all her time?

Sills: That's right. As I look back, it must have been quite a struggle.

Then you didn't have supermarkets and things like that. You did your shopping differently and you spent a lot of time. And if you had little money you had to plan better. And you did certain things on certain days because it was less expensive. You know, your whole life was centered on survival, basic survival.

I remember going to the shows on Saturday for a nickle, going to the movies. Loved the movies. Used to sit through two of them.

Cobble: Did she have hopes and ambitions for you?

Sills: I think it was probably just the regular - get married for the girls. For her son, I am sure she had ambitions. As it turned out he was a good business man. [illegible]. He was an inventor too. He invented a couple of things that he tried to sell. And one of them almost made it - an orange juice squeezer. I'll never forget that.

I think both Natalie and I suffered from the fact that we were <u>rejected</u> by our father. I am sure it had a <u>deep</u> affect on our personalities. One can't be objective in that respect. But I am sure it had because we knew that Gus - he never had this problem [pause] of (I am trying to think of the right word) inferiority. I think both of us had some of this instilled in us.

The whole culture, the way women and girls were treated, was conducive to this kind of feeling. But he tried everything. He had the self confidence. And I think I've suffered

Sills: from that inferiority complex.

Cobble: Was your mother self confident?

Sills: I'm not sure. To a certain extent I guess she was. She evidently handled things all right, but [pause] I wonder. I really don't know.

Cobble: Were there other adult models when you were a child?

Sills: I think I got most of mine from books. There was no one that I had any particular relationship with - a deeper relationship with.

Cobble: What kind of models did you get from books?

Sills: Oh, I think the popular type of thing. I think I got that - the popular type of model. Of course when I became interested in the labor movement I read a lot of different things. I began to see a wider perspective - people and their interests and activities, and the kind of lives they led which I would admire. But I had no indication of this when I was a kid.

Cobble: What were your early ambitions for yourself?

Sills: Probably get married. Probably find someone that fell in love with me. Get married, and raise a family. I don't think I went beyond that. I never had any particular ambition to become anything myself until I became interested in the labor movement. Then I began to see all kinds of possibilities. But the <u>one</u> thing that I saw was the lack of education was a problem. Because I am convinced that if you do have formal education, a good formal education, it develops certain basic things that stand you in good stead the rest of your life. The ability to think and figure things out the rational sort of way. I mean this training becomes a part of the way you function, It is

Sills: the one thing I never had you know.

I was rather attractive physically and didn't have any problem in the men department. But I always reacted, I felt, emotionally to things. I was convinced emotionally that this was the right thing to do rather than a thought out concept of how one proceeds.

Cobble: And you think that's something a good education - ?

Sills: Yes. One would have stood me in good stead. So when I was about nineteen and a business agent in the union, they wanted me to go to a University of Cal. special extention course that they were having, But I just was too busy and never could make it.

I was very spirited and spoke my mind when I became involved. No nonsense you know. Very tactless. I have always been very tactless. And as I look back on it, I could have gotten a lot more things done in if I had been a little less peppery. So I had the reputation of being a red hot labor enthusiast. I would really fight for the rights of - in a very strong manner. My sense of justice. I think that came from my family background. That my mother of the family brought. There was a sense of social justice that was involved there due to their experiences in the old country. A very strong sense of social justice. Some things were right and some things were wrong. A black and white type of thing. I had that because if I didn't have it I wouldn't have reacted the way I did at being dismissed. You see, I had that. And I think I probably read a lot of things that brought that out. Beside the junk that I read I must have read a couple of good things.

Cobble: And that was passed on to you?

Sills: Yes. I think so. And through the family

Sills: there was this feeling of social justice - a very important part of the family. And I probably got a lot of it from my uncle who was a scholar, because there would be a lot of arguments and debates, I remember, with him.

Cobble: When the family would have differences?

Sills: Yes when they would get together. And that's about all I can remember.

Cobble: What was your mother's attitude towards education?

Sills: Good. She wanted her kids to be educated. She strove for this, but circumstances didn't - I think we got a pretty good - we knew how to read and write and figure - a commercial type and that sort of thing. I must say I wasn't very interested, or didn't know enough to be interested. If I had I might have gotten more in terms of going after it aggressively. But we weren't conscious of those kind of things.

Cobble: Were there any teachers that were interested?

Sills: No. Sports. We were very good in sports. We had teachers that were very interested in tumbling, swimming. I was a very good swimmer and tennis player. Not exceptional, but good. I used to love sports. I was a good poker player too. In high school my friends used to play poker. We played cards, poker and bridge. We were very socially oriented. To go to this party and that party, and that's about all that interested us. And the things that were happening like in the movies - the cultural things of the day. We were very lightweight, very social. When I got involved with the labor movement, although I developed a very close friendship with two gals, they got married right away, right after high school.

Cobble: These were two friends from your high school days?

Sills: Yes. Very close friends. I used to practically live at one of their houses. They got married right away and I got involved in the labor movement, and we just separated. We never saw each other except at very long periods of time when we happened to bump into each other. You know, the friendship broke up.

Cobble: What was the basis of the friendship?

Sills: Family? You know the same kind of interests I guess. Being Jewish, liking the same sort of things - sports, dating. Dating probably was, in high school I think, the big thing You were supposed to meet the love of your life, and that was it. You would go off and raise a family. That was about the height of our interest at that time.

Cobble: Were you involved in any other outside activities?

Sills: Just in the sports in the Y and in camp.

My mother taught me how to embroider, and she wanted to teach me how to knit. But I never had the patience for that. Outside of reading I never sat still a minute. I had a lot of energy. Was always going somewhere and doing something. It was either playing tennis or going on a date, social. We went to dances. I liked to dance.

Cobble: What kind of things did you read?

Sills: The Bobbsy Twins. I started reading very young I think. And I don't really remember. But I read a lot. For a while I read those movie magazines when I was in high school. I was a typical high school teenager.

Cobble: Was there any interest in what was happening politically in San Francisco?

Sills: No awareness at all. We didn't even know who the mayors were, Rolph and. We would hear all the cliches of things. Of course when you had the radio - I don't think I

Sills: listened to the radio. My mother listened to the radio.

Cobble: What about the general strike? How did that affect you?

Sills: I didn't even - I knew there was a general strike, but it didn't affect me at all. It had no relationship to my life.

Cobble: Did your mother react to it?

Sills: I don't recall anything.

Cobble: It is amazing that you could have avoided it. It seemed to have taken over the city.

Sills: Yes. But we weren't involved. I am sure we discussed it,but I don't recall anything specific about it, what side we were on, or anything at all.

Cobble: You were talking about going out with boys, and everything. I wanted to ask you a few questions about that.

Did your mother explain, talk to you about sex?

Sills: About sex. Never. Completely innocent. She never even told us about menstruation. And I was horrified the first time. I thoughtI was dying or something. I didn't know what happened. And then, of course, I went to her. And then she told me what to do. But there was always sort of a shame involved with sex as far as she was concerned. That must have been the reason for her reluctance to say anything about it at all. She never told us anything. We didn't know from nothin'. We found out from our friends, by discussing it with our own friends.

Cobble: What did she say to you when you told her that you were bleeding?

Sills: Then she said it was a natural thing. At that time there weren't any Kotex. We used clean rags. But it was a frightening kind of experience to go through, not knowing that it was going to happen.

Cobble: How did you find out about sex?

Sills: Through discussion with my close friend. We used to discuss sex like kids will. And I never became involved sexually until I was twenty years old. I didn't meet anybody who turned me on, as they say now [laughs]. But I think by then I knew enough about life generally. I was curious enough to find out for myself. I was not afraid particularly. Except a little bit afraid in terms of getting pregnant.

Cobble: What was your mother's attitude toward sex?

Sills: I don't know. But it wasn't a good attitude I don't think. It was like a duty, I think.

Cobble: Did you ever bring her your problems?

Sills: No. When I -

End of Tape One (both sides)

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview: Marion Brown Sills
Date of Interview: June 27, 1977, at homs of Mrs. Sills
2416 15th Street, San Francisco, Calif.

Interviewer: Sue Cobble
Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin: Tape #2 - Counter #1 Page Twenty-three

[speaking of her close friend in high schoo]

Sills: It was really close, like a sister relationship. We really liked each other, and felt compatible in terms of interests. A warm friendship. She had a lot of brothers and sisters, and a mother and father. The house was always full, and we were always doing something or other. Whenever they cooked they cooked enough to take care of a whole army. It was the warm family relationship that I was attracted to, I think.

Cobble: Did you have any summer jobs beside the one in the Five and Ten Cent Store?

Sills: No. Went to camp in the summer and participated at the Y. They used to have a lot of hikes. We used to hike to Stinson Beach, go over on the ferry for hikes. And they had quite a few activities. There were a lot of boys involved, more than girls. They had a lot of activities for boys. My sister and I always got in on those activities. I don't know why. I know that she was a favorite of Yehudi's father. She would get tired on a hike and he would put her up on his shoulder. We were both kind of petite, but very wirey, very active physically.

Cobble: Did you think in terms of jobs you might have before you got this first job?

Sills: I probably did, but I don't recall anything particular. I probably had some ambitions,but I don't know what they were. That's sort of blotted out of my memory.

Cobble: Did you think that you might go further in school?

Sills: At that time, no. I was anxious to get out of school and get out in the world. No. I didn't want to go to school. It was when I became involved in the labor movement that I began to think of going back to school. But I never was in a position to do it. I probably couldn't do it; probably didn't have the necessary background to do it. You know there would have been a lot of catch-up that one would have to do. You sort of look back on it. It's a nostalgic thing. Because you didn't have it you think if you had it there would be a difference in the work. It is not necessarily so. But it might have been so. It was a kind of missed opportunity that I would have liked to have had.

Cobble: What was your job at Woolworth's like?

Sills: Very routine. It wasn't difficult except you had to stay there a long time. You worked eight hours a day, six days a week.

Cobble: And overtime?

Sills: Some. And it wasn't particularly bad or good. I liked the fact that I was making some money, sixteen dollars a week. And I gave part of it to my mother for expenses, and part of it I kept. When you worked then, as now, you need a lot more clothes and things than if you weren't working.

Cobble: Did you think you would keep that job for a while?

Sills: Yes. See, I can't remember. I think I had some ambitions in terms of secretarial school,

Sills: telephone operator, or something a little different. More skilled work. Like a secretarial job was a better job. It paid more. I probably had that kind of ambition. But mainly to get married. I think that was the - meet the right man and get married. That seemed to be more the norm for kids in my day.

Cobble: Were you working mainly among women?

Sills: Yes. They were mostly women. A few stock boys. Otherwise it was all women.

Cobble: Did you socialize with the women at work?

Sills: I was friends with some of them, but didn't socialize. My outside social life was with this group I went to school with. We went to dances and went to parties. I didn't have any social relationships with anyone at work.

Cobble: Were your bosses men or women?

Sills: Women.

Cobble: How did you feel about your bosses?

Sills: I didn't like them. I didn't like this one. She was a very authoritative person. Tough. You couldn't get away with anything. The rules were very strict, and strictly enforced.

Cobble: What were some of the rules?

Sills: I don't remember.But they were - you had to be there on time. A certain formula that you followed as far as work was concerned was laid out. It was written up. I don't remember what they were now. Of course they were usually designed to keep your nose to the grindstone type of thing. I don't remember specifically.

Cobble: Was there a general resentment about the rules?

Sills: You'd bitch about them,but it wasn't any big deal. I don't remember ever being outraged until I got fired. There wasn't anything that I didn't comply with or think

Sills: was too important. It was the way it was, and you accepted it. You may not have liked it, but you accepted it.

Cobble: Did you have responsibilities around the home?

Sills: Not very much. You see, my mother never taught us how to cook. But we would clean the house. She always was after us to clean the house. I think that was about the only thing.

And after I started working we never did things together any more as mother and children. We would rush home and eat and then rush out again. We had a date, or we were going here or going there. We were always involved in things outside the house. It was very lonesome for her, I can imagine. Very lonesome after the kids grew up. She didn't have very much except the radio and her friends, her few friends.

Cobble: Were you still living on the same street?

Sills: No, we weren't living there. We moved from there to Page Street, Page and Clayton. And we lived there. We must have lived on Birch Avenue for a long time, about seven years. Then we lived on Page Street for a long time. Then the other place we had - we lived out on Carmel and Belvedere. My mother rented a flat there. We lived there for a long time. So we only lived in the city as a family unit.

Cobble: Do you know why she moved?

Sills: Better housing, and able to afford it, afford a little better and bigger place. It was always an improvement in the living. Down on Birch Avenue we didn't even have a bathroom inside. We had an outside john, out on the porch. And the bath tubs were the tin tubs. And once a week you got a bath. Otherwise you just washed your hands and face. Never bathed every day.

Cobble: Was the bathroom just for your family?

Sills: The toilet? Yes. I think so. But I remember it was awful cold out there. I remember that.

Cobble: Did you have ambitions to move up when you got your job at Woolworths?

Sills: I must have had ambitions. I don't recall anything specific though. I must have because this whole new - movie magazines, the glamorous life. I must have had.But I don't recall any particular one. I must have lived in that fantasy world. Hollywood, you know.

Cobble: What things would have been open for you in the store itself?

Sills: Nothing. Nothing. We knew that. That's why I think we wanted to be secretaries.

Cobble: We could stop now, and next time begin with the strike if that's all right with you.

Sills: OK

First side of tape not completed

Interview No. 2 - July 11, 1977

Second Side of Tape

Cobble: Why don't you tell me how your involvement in the labor movement came about?

Sills: You don't want all the details you have in writing do you? You want just a short synopsis.

Cobble: Why don't you just go ahead and tell me. If there are questions I have, I'll just follow up.

Sills: OK. You want the whole story.

It was in the Spring of 1936 - either the Spring or Summer of '36. The longshoremen, who belonged to the AFL-CIO then, belonged to the International Longshoremen's Association under the leadership of Bridges. They had successfully negotiated a contract for the longshoremen. For the first time in the history of San Francisco they had a democratic union representing them, representing the longshoremen. And they had decided to organize warehousemen, which was an industry that would add to the strength and would help the longshoremen because they were allied with, their work very closely allied, on the waterfront and with their warehouses with the trucking to and from.

So one of the first places that the longshoremen tried to organize was the Woolworth warehouse. And they had success in signing up members into the first uptown warehouse, which later became the Warehouse Local 6, I.LWU Local 6. [phone rings] They had a group of organizers. Wait. I am getting ahead of myself. They organized the Woolowrth warehouse, but the Woolworth employers wouldn't sit down and negotiate a contract with the Union. See, at that time they didn't have

Sills: the N.L.R.B. [National Labor Relations Board] where you had to recognize the union if there was a majority. They had nothing like that. As a matter of fact if they had any laws on the books, it was in favor of the employers, and not in favor of helping working people organize unions. So they wouldn't recognize them. So they decided to spread the information about what they were doing. So they decided to go on strike. They decided to tell the story of what they were doing to the people of San Francisco and ask for their support. And one of the things that they did was to place an informational picket line out in front of the Woolworth store which was at Fifth and Market. Right on the corner there.

Some of the organizers came into the store and went around to the counters and started talking to the employees telling them why there was a picket line there and asking them to come to a meeting o hear more about what was going on for themselves; that they might be able to organize a union for themselves. And they set a meeting at the Labor Council for a Sunday.

I heard about it. They had two women working at this one counter. And we said we were going to go to hear what it was all about. We didn't know a thing about unions and we decided that we wanted to hear more about it.

So seven employees went from that store. There were hundreds of employees. It was the biggest store in the city. So seven of us went to hear the union story. And as we came to the Labor Council at Sixteenth and Mission at that time, we saw our assistant manager who was right outside. And he said hello to all of us. We said hello, you know, and we went in and we listened to the meeting -

Cobble: What was being discussed?

Sills: It was the warehouse strike. And at this time all of labor within San Francisco was represented within the Labor Council. They all had delegates to the Labor Council. And it was a vibrant, argumentive place where you would bring up different points of view in terms of what your policy should be. It met every Friday night and there was a lot of participation Fridays with delegates from the various unions taking various sides on issues.

And this is one of the things they wanted to do. They were helping. The whole of San Francisco wanted to help organize the unorganized.

So they were talking about what the conditions were at the Woolworth warehouse, why the strike took place. And they planned to have mass picketing in front of the store. And they were going to invite all of labor to participate, so that this would also be a challenge to mass picketing. There was an ordinance in San Francisco against mass picketing at that time. You could only have one or two pickets. It was the Supervisors of San Francisco who put in an ordinance against mass picketing, using the arguments that it congested the streets, and all the silly arguments. Labor was determined to break this, and they thought this was a good opportunity in the Woolworth situation.So they started mass picketing the week after, I think, this Sunday meeting.

So we listened, and it was interesting, but I don't recall any specific results from that particular meeting.

So I went to work on Monday.And all seven of us who went to the meeting were fired.

Sills: As soon as we came to work we were fired. We were not told why or anything. We were just through.

I was furious because I had worked there two years, and I was a good worker, and I knew it had nothing to do with my work. And I thought it was really unjustified. But there was no way in which you could really talk to anyone.

Cobble: How were you told you were fired?

Sills: As we came to work we were told that they wouldn't need our services any more. Maybe they gave us an excuse. I don't recall that. That was it, Monday, right after the Sunday meeting. So naturally we went out. And the picket line had grown. There was a lot of union officials on the picket line. I remember Jack Goldberger of the International Service Workers. I remember George Hardy, Sr. And a lot of labor officials were on the picket line. It was a huge line. So we told them what happened. And they said, "Aha! Well, you can rest assured, when this strike is settled we will not go back to work unless everyone is put back to work, all seven are put back to work."

So I went on the picket line. And that's when I became really interested and began asking questions and became friendly with the labor people there, and began to find out what to me was a different world and different possibilities as far as justice for working people was concerned in the championship of working people by the labor movement.

Cobble: Had you had any contact with unions?

Sills: No I hadn't any contact with any unions or any political movements or anything. I was completely apolitical, and hadn't known anything. This was a very exciting time for me because I became very interested - [pause - mail arrived] I went to meetings and I became acquainted with all the people who were very active in the labor movement by going to the Labor Council. I started attending the Labor Council meetings every Friday night.

Cobble: This is separate from the organizing meetings?

Sills: Yes. It was separate from the organizing meetings.

Cobble: What were the organizing meetings?

Sills: Well, that was around the strike, in support of the strikers, the warehouse strikers in the Woolworth warehouse.

And I began attending the Labor Council meetings and began listening to the various points of view. And there was a tug of war between those officials who wanted the status quo and didn't want any changes, and said "you can never organize white collar workers." It wasn't possible. They were too individualistic and most of them were women who were only working temporarily. That was the story, they were only working temporarily because they had some bill to pay, or other, and were helping their husbands. Just temporarily, that they would come and go, and it was an impossible situation. It couldn't be done. They tried, they said, and it was impossible.

Ofcourse we saw the Longshoremen, on the other hand, militant, who had new ideas, who were considered radical, but who had new ideas and creative ideas about how to organize, and were organizing. So we thought if the warehousemen

Sills: and longshoremen can organize, certainly we can organize the clerks.

Cobble: Were you bringing up organizing the clerks, or were there other people in the Labor Council?

Sills: There were other people in the Labor Council supporting us. I know there were only two women. There was Jennie Matyas from the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union], she was the International representative in San Francisco. And Carmen Lucia. She was the Millinery Workers organizer, with headquarters on Market Street. And we became friendly and they said we could work out of there . They said we'll help you try and organize the clerks. We'll do whatever we can. They gave us a little space in their office. They helped us with ideas. But we met a lot of young people who were involved in trying to organize other unions in the City at that time. But I couldn't tell you exactly what the unions they were trying to organize were. There seemed to be an upsurge of interest in organizing. Conditions were so rough in terms of low wages, long hours, no conditions actually as far as vacations or holidays or anything. There was a feeling amongst a lot of younger people that I think were representative of socialist and communist party groups in seeing the labor movement organized. And they were very helpful, a lot of them in helping us develop leaflets and develop ideas of what to do, and a concept of prganizing.

I became so involved and so interested that I decided ~~that I decided~~ I was going to stick with trying to organize a union in the retail field. Having worked in the field, I got some names of the people working in the big stores

Sills: like the White House and O'Connor and Moffatts, the big department stores, What we did is we went to visit people at their homes and talked to them about the union. The need was there. The need was obvious. But there was a great fear that they would be fired. It was the height of the depression, and to lose one's job was, in some situations, catastrophic. It was deadly. They would help us, these people that we saw, by giving us names of different people.

Finally, in a few weeks or in a month or so, we collected a series of names from the various stores, including all the big stores like Weinsteins, the Emporium (I guess they had Penny's then) - all the big stores anyway.

Somebody gave us a case of whiskey and we raffled it off. We is a few people who met as a committee from the stores. Outside nobody knew that they were involved because we had to be sure that they wouldn't get fired.

Cobble: How did you weed out spies and infiltrators?

Sills: We obviously didn't have any spies or infiltrators. We took that industry by surprise. They were. They were <u>shocked</u> when I tell you what happened. They were caught <u>completely unawares</u>. So we didn't run into any spies. There wasn't as highly a developed spy system that there became later after world war two. I am sure there were in the union after it was organized, but not before. So we were lucky in that respect.

And we also had people who had worked in the stores a long time and knew the rest of their fellow workers, and knew who was who.

Sills: Who to ask, who to talk to, and who not to talk to. So we decided the best thing to do was to have a series of leaflets at the various stores when the employees came out with the idea in mind to culminate in a meeting that would be called.

In the Spring of '37 there had been a lot of talk in the stores and the leaflets were out. But evidently the employers didn't think it was going to get anywhere. They tried to stop us from passing out leaflets a lot of times, but we learned this from people who had experience in organizing before. We would have one person with the leaflets at the door, at the back of Weinstins I remember. Then when the cop would come up to get them out of the way. You know, "You can't do this here."Try to intimidate them. They would keep the cop involved, and somebody else would come and pass out the leaflets. I remember one cop chasing me around the block. He never caught me. All they did was try and intimidate us. They didn't arrest us, but there was intimidation. And we managed to pass out the leaflets regardless.

In the Spring of '37 we had our first meeting at the Milliners hall. A hundred people showed up. I had never spoken publicly before. I was introduced and asked to get up and say something. I remember how frightened I was. Obviously I had been involved and I knew what was going on, and it wasn't that much of an ordeal. The first time you are asked to get up before a group and speak when you are not used to that sort of thingis kind of frightening, but also very exciting. So anyway the thing was we had Carmen speak. I think there was Carmen and a couple of other people from

Sills: labor. And the idea that developed at the meeting was that everyone would go back to the store and really put on a drive to sign up people, and that we would have a meeting next week, the following week.

The following week we had two hundred or more. And then the applications started coming in. In a matter of three or four weeks we had six thousand members. It went like wildfire. It really spread, and it spread fast.

Cobble: Were you still trying to keep it under cover at this point?

Sills: Not at this point. We didn't have time to do anything but try and set up the organization, to set up the union, because there was nothing, there was no office. So we got a lot of help from the Labor Council people. And as I look back, you know, not really knowing anything about how a union operated, it was already decided, they made me the first business agent.

And we didn't even have any officers, we didn't have a charter or anything.

Cobble: Was this an elected - ?

Sills: Yes. They elected me at the second meeting as the first business agent. Then the people who had been active in the campaigns in the various stores - I don't know how this was arranged, but they had, at the following meeting people had been selected to run for the constituional offices. The charter had been drawn up. What they asked me to do was to join #410 which was the only Clerks union then. So I joined #410. Because I joined #410 they wouldn't let me sign the charter. When I look back I wonder how all these things developed

Sills: the way they did. But it was so hectic. And I can't really say that it was the kind of situation where the older heads in the labor movement had plans and really moved in there, seeing that the local wasn't controlled completely from the outside so to speak by the -

Cobble: By the International?

Sills: Yes. It must have been the International and the Labor Council people who really sort of took us under their wing and set the whole thing up. None of us knew anything.

Cobble: Why did you join the grocery clerks?

Sills: You mean Local #410 - It was the shoe clerks. Yes. It was the only clerks union around. I don't remember the reason that they asked me to do that; and I don't remember who asked me either. As I look back on it now,* if I had had any kind of experience or training in the labor movement I wouldn't have done that. I would have probably waited and run for one of the constitutional offices instead of for business agent. ~~But anyway where more of the policy was decided.~~ Those offices was all where more decisions were made. Business agents became the "hired employees" of the union. And although we were on the executive board and we had a say in policy, the policy was really set by the people who worked in the stores and who were the constitutional officers of the union.

This is looking back. At the time it just didn't occur to me to think of those things. ~~Alright. We had one or two business agents, and we elected somebody else. And~~ I'm telling you, life was really hectic for the next period. It was just constant trying to consolidate and set up and take care of the grievances.

We started out on the basis that this

*See page 120 for clarification & addition by MB Sills in the footnotes.

Sills: was the most important thing. ~~After~~ while the first contract was negotiated a lot of us wanted to hold out for a closed shop agreement. The employers gave us a hefty increase. They gave us recognition, a hefty increase. They gave us a lot of conditions, a lot of improvement in conditions, and vacation pay, and other things. I don't remember the details. But the one thing they wouldn't give us was the union shop. *

[phone rings - pause]

Cobble: Before we talk about the contract, I have some more questions about organizing.

Sills: Sure.

Cobble: What store was the easiest store to organize?

Sills: Well, you see, as I remember they came in so fast. The applications came in so fast that we had majorities in all of the stores, in the big stores. So it wasn't a question of which store ~~is~~ was the hardest to organize. There wasn't any employer opposition because we caught them unawares. It was only later that this began to develop; when we began to take up complaints.

Oh, I remember what happened. After the first contract was signed the employers organized an employers council and negotiated as a group and became a resistant group. They had their own representative and the union had to deal with this representative of the employers. In other words, what was done in one store applied to all. I mean whatever was

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* Full information on this available through other sources, i.e. Retail Clerks Local #1100, San Francisco, Calif.

Sills: settled between the employers' representative.* And this took place right after the first contract was signed. And we were counseled at the first contract, as I said, by a lot of the labor officials. "OK, look at all you've got." This is the gist. It wasn't as clear as this is to us now. But this was the gist of it. "Next year you'll get the union shop. Sign the contract. Consolidate. Build the union, and next year you'll go in for the union shop." And we thought that sounded logical to us. But what happened, what we didn't know was going to happen and what did take place was the employers got organized. And for thirty years they didn't give us the union shop. For thirty years that was an open shop.

End of tape two

* who spoke for all the stores grouped in their council & the union who represented all the people working in the same group of stores. Organization of the Employers Council representing the main department stores took place right after the first contract was signed. It might have taken place during the negotiations itself.

Sills: What other questions did you want to ask?

Cobble: Well, in terms of response between men and women. Did you see any difference in response?

Sills: No. The industry was composed mostly of women. And I would say right from the beginning they were the backbone of the union. The women really were strongly supportive once we had - The conditions had changed, improved so dramatically once we had a union. They were the backbone.

All throughout the union, and I don't know if it's true today (you know I've been out of it so many years I don't know what has taken place), but I know there has been change in the attitude.

At that time the salesmen who sold, they were called the big ticket salesmen, Furniture, refrigerators and the big items and got a good commission and were paid well above the average person who worked in the store, were kind of difficult. They didn't join the union until something happened to them personal. But I would say that the women were the main support of the union.

So I worked for two years as a business agent. I was twenty years old by then. I was also interested in meeting someone and getting married, raising a family. You know my romantic interest was one of the things that I looked forward to. And I found out after two years that I was beginning to feel - the stresse and strains of the job was beginning to tell on me. As I look back on it now, you know it

Sills: is interesting. You see I never realized women were treated differently in society. It never became a conscious realization until my latter years. There really was resentment against women taking leading positions. I mean you almost deferred to the men saying "You can do that job, but I don't have any experience or ability to do it." Consequently, and not having had any kind of training in terms of how to pace ones self on a job - you know we worked all kinds of hours. It was like living the job. And so in two years I became a physical wreck. Really I couldn't take the stresses and strains. So I resigned from the business agent's job, and I was given a job in the office. I had not been an office worker,but I was given a job in the office. And that became a routine job which I couldn't stand. I didn't stay on that job very long. Maybe about a year.

And also I became aware of a lot of political issues that interested me - things that were happening politically in the country. And I had a feeling that along with the organization of the trade union movement it was very important to become involved in activity so that the union could help change the way things were done nationally and locally in terms of political decisions that were made without any input from working people. And I thought we should have more political participation. And there was a tug of war. There were people in the union who said no, the union is primarily to take care of the wages, working conditions of the people. And this turned out to be the predominant ideology that the labor movement followed for years.I mean they became - as the struggle for political

Sills: ideas - different political ideas- became sharper - In other words, they didn't object to saying what they felt about issues that concerned the working person, but they really didn't become involved in terms of setting any policies that would challenge the political ideas that were prevalent in our legislature and in our national Congress.

I felt that there had to be a basic change in society. In other words no change would come unless it was accepted by the people; and that we had to work for basic changes because everything would be very transitory. What you did this year could be taken away from you next year. And it was a constant battle. And that we should have more justice in terms of educational opportunies, economic opportunity that just didn't exist as far as working people were concerned.

Cobble: How did this split - is there an issue that you can remember that political factions took opposite sides on?

Sills: I remember that there were a lot of issues [pause]. I am trying to remember. This is what is very hazy in my memory. I really can't recall. I know I became a target really, because my ideas were pretty radical - considered radical in the labor movement. And I became a target in terms of political ideas.

But the one thing that existed then was that ~~they~~ issues were debated in meetings, and the meetings were well attended. So the political ideas were debated, and the issues of the union were debated - what was happening and so forth. And this was true throughout the

Sills: labor movement. There was a constant struggle for supremacy of ideas. There were a lot of instances where the unions took one position on a policy and the Labor Council took another position, and the hierarchy in the national office - In other words, it was conservative plus radical - conservative ideas and radical ideas. And things seemed to split on this kind of an ideological basis. I can't remember any of the specific battles. I know they were one after the other.

Cobble: What about whether the union should join the CIO?

Sills: Oh. That's right. That was one of the big splits in the labor movement. Trade union organization took place throughout the country in the mass industries like rubber and automobile. They organized on the basis of taking <u>everybody</u> who worked for the corporation in one union. That became a real division. And the AF of L at that time felt they were doing very well with the skilled, and quite well with the unskilled like clerks andsome service workers. Their unions were growing and they just weren't interested in the concept of broader organization.

Cobble: How did the members of your union feel about joining the CIO?

Sills: See - we were organized on an industrial basis. And it still is the only one of its kind. They liked the organization the way it was. I don't recall the specifics of the battle, and I know that there was lots of them. And I don't recall what action was taken. If I ever get the time, they have some minutes. I could leaf through the minutes and that might bring back to mind the particular issues that you are talking about.But I don't know if I'll ever do that. I am so active now on so many things.

Sills: In forty one, let's see, I was still involved, and decided that I would - I became more political and I became involved in the campaigns that were taking place in regards to - Let's see. I can't remember what I did. It is kind of mixed up in my mind. But I know I became interested in -while I was working in the office I still maintained my interest in and activity in the union. It was in forty one that I got married.

Cobble: I'd like to go back before we skip ahead to forty one. There are a lot of things intervening.

When you first got involved, you said you were really attracted to people in the labor movement because they were different. In what way?

Sills: In terms of their ideas about how society should be operated. What was happening to working people. How they could help themselves by uniting and organizing. This was a radical thing at that time. There weren't very many unions except the old time building trades, railroad. There were some old line unions, but there wasn't anything on a large scale. It was only after thirty seven, or during thirty seven that new organizations like the Liquor Clerks organized for the first time, and other groups. The whole upsurge of organization, and a change in leadership as far as the Labor Council was concerned in San Francisco - a younger, more militant leadership represented, I know, by Jack Shelley, Wendell Phillips, those people who had been the outsiders. Who had been fighting with the conservation group like the Bakery Wagon Drivers that Shelley represented, and the Teamsters that Phillips represented. There was another guy, Kidwell, who was a real brain as

Sills: as far as figuring out tactics and strategy, who also had a perspective, a broad perspective of what the labor movement should be involved in. And he was, at one time, in the leadership of the Labor Council until he died.

So as we became organized there was a whole upsurge of organization throughout the country.

I remember one of the political battles was to get FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] to agree to a National Labor Relations Board. They didn't have a National Labor Relations Board. They didn't have certain regulations that would guarantee the right to organize, let alone anything else. And I know that was one of the political issues that we fought over, the right to organize written into the law. We had the NRA.

Cobble: What was that?

Sills: The National Recovery Act. It wasn't specific. But it was used by us to demand a clearer tyoe of law. And we used the NRA as a basis as a right to organize, for the recognition of the union. This was one of the big issues. And this was a political thing because you had to get the Congress to support the organization of trade unions.

And of course the sit ins of the basic industry, and a whole modernization took place in terms of the labor movement and how it should function.

As I recall, the reason they organized the CIO and they split from the AFL was the lack of political activity along with trade unionism. The new group wanted a merger of these ideas to become part of the policy of the labor movement. And the AF of L did not WANT

Sills: a merging of the issue. They wanted, to concentrate on working conditions, wages. In other words it revolved around the theory of support your friends and punish your enemies, when striking but not become involved actively. That's the position they took on political issues.

Cobble: In terms of the kind of support you got for white collar organizing from the Labor Council, was it generally the younger men that supported you, or was it people from certain kinds of industries that were more likely to support you?

Sills: Mostly the younger people. And then certain industries too. It was a combination. It depended on the leadership, the understanding of the leadership of the various unions as to whether we were supported. Of course an awful lot of pressure in our early years for the Teamsters to go through our picket lines. And they did. We had a nine month strike at Kress, for instance, in our early days, and they went through the picket line.

I remember the incident of what happened. So that there were deals made behind our backs with the employers. And the Teamsters got certain advantages, better recognition and better wages when they took this kind of action.

Cobble: Was there any kind of reprimant of the Teamsters by the Labor Council?

Sills: Yes, there was. But it was split. Officially there was a reprimand, and there was a great deal of agitation around it.

And I remember this one incident. I was in the back - the first time a truck drove up, a teamsters truck, to unload merchandise for Kress (you see they were operating with scabs) there must have been around thirty of us women. And as he drove up to the door ~~we~~ MANY jumped on the truck and we began throwing things out in the

Sills: alley, throwing merchandise out, and began yelling. And I remember the big teamster, and he had a little bit of hair. And as he bent down I grabbed that little bit of hair and didn't have enough sense to move away. And he came down and hit me right on the center of my head. I felt like I was going through the pavement. So we had a lot of people gathering around watching this, and the reporters came. People saw him hit me, but they didn't see me pull his hair. They were indignant. I was OK. I wasn't really hurt badly. But do you know that that guy ended up in a hospital later. We don't know what happened. But he ended up in a hospital. There was a big uproar about it. But the Teamsters, whoever had made the deal, were strong enough to enforce, you know, scabbing on the Clerks. And they did that to us a lot of times. But there were other teamsters, like the Bakery Wagon Drivers, who always supported us with not only money, but assistance of any type we asked for. So there was this split in the labor movement.

Cobble: Did the Teamsters not support you in part because of your close affiliation with the ILWU?

Sills: I don't [pause] - I don't really know. That might have been part of it. You see, the Teamsters #85 had a conservative leadership. That was the leadership that was dumped out of the Labor Council. And it might very well have been a part of the reason. It would be a part of the reason. But you see they made deals with the employer. They had contact. They worked in cooperation with the employers and we, at that time, felt our employers were our adversaries, and we never worked cooperatively [laughs] with them. It was a different attitude.

Sills: That might very well have been part of the reason.

Cobble: When the Warehouse strike was settled in 1936, everyone got their job back but you. Why was that?

Sills: Oh yes. Woolworth company said that they would take everybody back but me.* I was the ringleader, they said. I was the agitator, the ringleader, spoke up about the union and the issues, you know, didn't make any bones about it. They said they wouldn't take me back. Well, the warehousemen said they would stay out until they settled this issue. But I said, "No," I didn't wanto to go back, and I really didn't want to go back. You know, "It's OK with me if you settle the strike." And, "I want to try and organize the clerks." I was already convinced that it was a possible thing. And it was exciting. To me it was an exciting type of life because you were always fighting [laughter] and struggling. You are always creating, trying something new, and it was very exciting not to be stuck in a dull job day after day after day. And I wasn't particularly interested in a routine job. As a matter of fact I felt that if we were able to convince the labor movement here and throughout the country that if they did get involved in politics as well as organizing that we can make some basic changes in our society. I was all for this. I felt that within ten or fifteen years that we would have some real changes. I was convinced that this was going to happen. It wasn't until after World War II and the political repression, and all the developments that led up to that, I began to see that it was going to be a longer process than just what we did.

Cobble: Were you being paid when you first started organizing?

* The other six who were fired because they went to that first Labor Temple meeting were reinstated.

Sills: No. I didn't get any money. I was a volunteer. And I must say [laughs] I have been a volunteer all my life ever since then. It is sort of a pattern.

When I became business agent I got twenty five dollars a week [laughs]. We believed that the officers shouldn't get too far above the membership because then they begin to forget what it was like to work in a store. And we didn't want them to forget in terms of being an officer of the union. So it would be that they would fight harder for themselves and the members if they didn't get too high of a salary. It was a very conscious decision on the part of the union membership. So I worked for twenty five dollars a week. I never got any other benefits except the twenty five dollars a week.

After I left the union, I paid my membership dues for years and years until finally the International (I had book number one in the union and I wanted to keep it) said that if you are out of the industry you have to take a withdrawal card, and they just sent me a withdrawal card.

But I must say that I got into disagreements with the international union, you see, very early. I was considered a radical maverick. My ideas were too radical for them. In the subsequent years when I decided I was going to go back to work in the stores and try and discuss political ideas in the stores, I found myself losing one job after the other. As soon as they found out who I was I was out. And I worked in the stores for quite a few years after I got married. Then I began drifting away from the industry.

Cobble: What were some of the early battles with the International?

Sills: On policy in terms of whether we should become involved in social and political issues.

Sills: That was the main crux of it. And I was all for involvement. And the International people were allfor a more conservative approach, sticking to the wages and working conditions, and taking a stand on issues, but not developing them or giving leadership to social and political issues, and help to the community people, you know people in the community other than the labor movement. Making alliances and trying to affect the political arena effectively. And this is where there was a real tug of war.

At one time the battle became so heated that they were almost going to expel me, bring me up on charges. I don't remember what the charges were, and I don't think they would have stuck. Buy anyway the harrassment always was there from the International and from the conservative element in the labor movement. But I didn't dare. It didn't mean much to me because I was sure they were going to be defeated and that we were going to win over because I think I have always held this sort of a simplistic point of view. There is a right in everything and there is a wrong in everything and if you are on the right side you are going to win out. Well, it's not necessarily true. As a matter of fact it isn't true. You have to win enough people in order to effect a change.

End of side one

Tape Three - side two Counter #1

Sills: For instance a part of my attitude which would indicate what I thought like at that period of time was that if I went back in the States, if I set a good example other people would follow.And It's true but you have to do ~~it~~ MORE - in a country as large as the United States, in order to make some basic

Sills: political changes, you have to have enough people doing that to catch fire. It isn't just what you do. But I've always lived on that kind of simple formula that allright, I had choices. They were limited, but I had choices and this is the kind of choices that I would make, that I felt comfortable with. And I felt comfortable with the radical politics of the day. I felt very comfortable with it. I wanted to see it gain support and promise. Up until the time that the Soviet Union marched into Hungary, I felt that socialism was the answer to the economic injustices that existed in the world.

Cobble: You said, when you first started organizing, that you got support from Jennie Matyas and also from the ILWU. What ways did the ILWU support your organizing?

Sills: We used to meet in sort of a caucus, and they used to help with ideas, and in any way that they can.

Cobble: Can you name any other people that were involved.

Sills: Yes. There was Harry Bridges and Louis Goldblatt. And there was Ralph Dawson and Eugene Paton of the ILWU. I remember them specifically.

Cobble: I have been told that Bridges wasn't really that sympathetic to white collar organizing.

Sills: Oh. Not true at all. He was very much in favor. As a matter of fact, if anything (we used to have arguments) we weren't militant enough. We weren't as militant as the longshoremen. But we were in a different position in society than the longshoremen were. They had one hundred percent organization, and we had a open shop. We had to fight allllll along the line for every little gain, and we had to fight to maintain a majority of membership in the union. And it wasn't easy because we also took the lead, as on new political ideas

Sills: the union does today under the leadership of Walt Johnson. He is terrific in that respect. We always felt we had to be linked with the community; that we had to support social and political ideas that would help working people. But, oh no, he [Bridges] was in favor. As a matter of fact ~~if~~ IT WAS Bridges and Goldblatt and all these people, WHO were the ones that decided to move into the warehouse industry in the first place, and Woolworth's was the first place they moved into. UPTOWN. I would say that Bridges and Goldblatt had a very progressive attitude all the time, and very supportive in terms of other unions and helping them. I can't recall one instance where they didn't help with money and whatever resources that they could give. Even when they were CIO and out, they would still help and work together. with all unions. OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Cobble: You also mentioned political groups. Did you get support fromthe Communist Party?

Sills: We got a lot of support from the Communist Party and the Socialist Parties. There were a couple of Socialist Parties. Yes we did. We got a lot of support in terms of what we used to called Jimmy Higgins work, the day to day daily things that have to be done. People from the Communist Party and the Socilist party would help in passing out leaflets and any of the things that took time and effort. They were always supportive. Always helped.

Cobble: What kind of particular advice did you get because you were organizing white collar workers?

Sills: I don't remember any particular thing. You see our union was really organized by people in the industry. It really was. Not that we didn't get help from the Carmen Lucias and the ILWU and so forth. But it was really done by the people in the industry. We had a knowledge of the industry.

Sills: We knew what it was like and took certain precautions in terms of protection of people so they wouldn't stick their neck out so far that they would get fired. From the very beginning I was the example that it could happen, so that we knew, you know, we had to work around certain things.But this came from the knowledge of being in the industry which we had because we were there and we were going through these experiences.

And there was a great deal of participation in our meetings. We had big membership meetings all the time. There was a militancy that never was killed in all these years. It still exists. And it is interesting that, you know, I have come to believe that this is what life is all about. You struggle to change things that you know should be changed, or that are bad for people. And a satisfaction arises when you can make progress. This is what it is all about. You struggle to make life better. The things that you do have to have support from other people. It just can't be your ideas. And there was a great give and take even within our own local.

But there also was a very conservative streak that was evident throughout this whole period. On the one hand there were vast changes being made, and new ideas. On the other hand there was the status quo and the conservative ideas that remained dominant. So it was always a struggle between the two.

Cobble: Why were people in the department stores so receptive to unionizations?

Sills: Because their conditions were miserable. Because they had no say on conditions, hours, or in terms of wages. In terms of anything they had.

Sills: Everything was set for them, and they didn't have any say, because if you objected to a conditions it was very easy to get rid of one person or two persons or three persons. It was only when the union became dominant that we were able to stop a lot of practices that were really terribly exploited and unconcerned about hours and about under what conditions one worked, made your livelihood. And people didn't have any say at all. Anything went. So this was why it was ripe.

Cobble: Do you think their proximity with blue collar workers like the warehousemen worked in your favor?

Sills: Oh yes. Definitely. You see a lot of women who worked in the industry had husbands who were machinists, teamsters, warehousemen, longshoremen, or whatever, building trades. And they were all organized. Oh, yes. It had an effect because they knew their husbands unions had been doing a good job.

Cobble: I was just thinking in terms of comparing, say, your successful drive with something like the bank workers, the office and professional employees, which never really got off the ground, whether it was a different kind of person that was in your industry, or the structure of the industry.

Sills: I would say a different kind of person. They would also be sons and daughters of the union people in this area anyway. They would be influenced by what happened. It is very difficult to say why the office workers - it is true. They never did get off the ground maybe because they were such a large contingentall along. There were a lot of - the financial district of San Francisco hired a lot of people constantly and they were sort of isolated in the financial canyon of Montgomery Street.

Sills: Maybe that was part of it. 3 And I don't know. Did they hire a lot of people out of college too, didn't they?

Cobble: Did most of the people working in department stores have a high school education compared to college people?

Sills: Yes. That's right. And there's a different attitude, or there was. They no longer became transient in terms of jobs. They stayed. The women stayed, and worked, and raised their families, and so forth.

Cobble: And this was new, in the thirties? This was true in the thirties?

Sills: This was true in the thirties whereas, in the offices there was a rapid changeover in jobs because maybe they were going to school in the evenings or something, or the ambitions and career development idea was different. That might have played a part in it about the offices per se. But it was true. They never were touched. The big insurance companies. There was more paternalism, and there was more of an effort to give them a little bit more to keep them from organizing. That probably was a big part of it after the stores were organized and San Francisco became almost one hundred percent union town except for the office workers and the city workers. Maybe that's what was kept them out. - they gave them a little bit more to prevent organization. That might have been a big factor. Other than that I really don't know.

Cobble: Were you involved in organizing any of the specialty shops and smaller shops?

Sills: As soon as our contract was signed we went after the little stores. That was easy after they saw what the department stores got. But we did that.

Cobble: How did you protect people from being fired?

Sills: We didn't approach the employer until everybody was in the union so they couldn't pick on one person. We didn't approach them for a change in conditions until they were all in the union. We had practically every store in the city of any consequence - hardware, jewelry, specialty shops.

Cobble: Did people who worked in specialty shops have a different attitude towards their employer then the larger factory type stores?

Sills: Yes. There is a slight difference because they are in closer contact with the employer's representative every day. They are right there. They are around you all the time. There is a little different attitude. But it's sort of a two way deal. I mean they will tell the employer one thing. But they still know that their allegiance lies with the union. If it wasn't for the union their conditions wouldn't change. That ~~was~~ had a big bearing. You know there is a lot of soft soaping that goes on, but when it comes to a showdown I don't think they waivered in their support of the union.

Cobble: We were talking earlier about some of the arguments that were used to say you couldn't succeed in white collar organizing, like women only worked for pin money and that you would have trouble organizing women. Did you find that to be true?

Sills: There was such a good feeling of community when our union was organized. We used to call it brotherhood. There was such a good feeling. There was such a change - a hopeful feeling that you could make changes and that things could be better. There was such a great leap forward in that respect. And that was one of

Sills: the things that the labor movement had in the thirties that they don't have now. It is one of the things that has become eroded for a variety of reasons. There was a feeling like you were one group - that you were brothers and sisters. It was like a family feeling that existed in the labor movement, the newly organized group. It was probably true in some of the older unions. When the new people came in there was a real upsurge of this kind of feeling. A feeling of power. A feeling of dignity is involved too - that they are recognized as a person. That all became a part of the scene. It was a wonderful thing.

Cobble: Did you have any problem with women not being able to go to meetings because they had responsibilities at home?

Sills: That was true to a certain extent. ~~But I'm sure because of particular problems.~~ We never had any particular problems. Women turned out at our meetings all the time. We were alive and we were doing things and we were concerned with what was happening. And they were there. They were concerned too.

Cobble: Did you make any kind of arrangements for day care, or anything like that?

Sills: We didn't. No. Usually the husbands or someone in the family. You see, there was a closer family relationship that existed in the thirties too that doesn't exist now. Families have moved off in different directions and different things happen to different parts of the family today so that they aren't as close. But it wasn't any problem. They would get somebody in the family to take care of the kids if they were going to a meeting. Or their husband would be home. It never seemed to be an issue as I recall.

Cobble: Did women speak up in meetings?

Sills: Oh yes. They spoke up.

Cobble: You mentioned early on that you got a charter from the International.

Sills: Yes. The R.C.I.A. [Retail Clerks International Association], Yes.

Cobble: How did you go about drawing up the constitution?

Sills: I think we got help from the labor people. You know, the experienced labor people ~~when we~~ drew up a constitution. Also ~~also~~ the International had a constitution, already had one in existence. So that was just incorporated and accepted.

Cobble: What about on the first contract.What was the procedure there?

Sills: The first contract was negotiated, because all of us were so inexperienced, there was a firm called Melnikoff [I have forgotten the name of the firm] and Sam Kagel were partners, Sam did most of our negotiations, that was hired by the union, along with the officers like Jack Shelley and Wendell Phillips and people that were always involved. The Labor Council was always involved. Sam I remember was our main negotiator. Melnikoff, who was the senior member of the firm [I have forgotten what it was called]

Cobble: The Labor Bureau? *

Sills: Yes. That's it. He did our negotiating for a while. Then he moved. He broadened out. A bright lawyer, and people were just starting their careers, they were really great. And what would happen is we would, the officers of the union (we always had a negotiating committee) would brief, we always had joint sessions where we would say what we wanted to stand on, and we

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* Pacific Coast Labor Bureau

Sills would argue the different points. And then Sam would take it from there. He did a lot of our negotiations. He was very good, excellent, ~~before~~ EVENTUALLY he went into being a kind of mediator.

Cobble: What kind of input did the rank and file have in drawing up a contract?

Sills: They always decided what the issues - It was always decided by the membership first as to what was going to be the main emphasis in the contract, what the wage increase was going to be. There was always a vote first on that. Then it went from there on to the officers and the negotiating committee, and the bargaining began.

Cobble: Were you in on the first negotiating?

Sills: Yes. I was in on practically all the first negotiations for the first two years anyway, when I was business agent. Oh yes, I was there. And learned a great deal about how you handle grievances, and how negotiations are handled. But we always had a spokesman, like Sam Kagel, in the negotiations. Of course they had their lawyers too and that was the reason. You had to have somebody that would meet them on their own grounds.

And I'll never forget when I first walked into the first Woolworth negotiations, Mr. Brown who was their chief negotiator (He was from their Montgomery Street office. Subsequently he was very high in the hierarchy of the Woolworth Company. He went back East to New York)when I was first introduced to him, "Ah",he said, "You know there is one thing that Woolworth Company is sorry about." And I said, "What's that, Mr. Brown?" And my name was Brown [laughs] a coincidence. He said, "That they ever fired Marion Brown." And I really felt great about that. That was the biggest thrill that I think I ever had in my life when we got them to sit down and talk to us, because that was ~~the~~ at the time it seemed of for employers to recognize that we even existed.

Sills: They wouldn't even consider talking to their working people. ~~They~~ Employees were, you know, just nothing. There was just never - equality? Oh, my God, they never even heard of the world equality. Only among themselves, amongst the upper echelons is there equality. But the working people do as "We tell them to do." That was the kind of attitude that existed before they had to, because of the organization, sit down and talk on an equal basis. It was a great feeling, great exhileration for me to have won out and made them sit down and talk. So that was part of the feeling.

Cobble: Were you negotiating individual contracts with stores?

Sills: There was a master contract for the department stores. After the first negotiation, which was organized for all the department stores, they organized a Retailers Council for all the big stores. And a lot of the little ones too. They representated a lot of the little ones too.

Cobble: So in the first negotiation -

Sills: They were unorganized. We caught them with their pants down so to speak. They didn't have anything. But within a year they had their own organization, and everything was taken up on this basis.

Cobble: Wh o were you negotiating for?

Sills: Everyone who worked in the department stores. We had all kinds of classifications. There still is a lot of classification. In subsequent years some of the warehouse people - the teamsters got some of the warehouse people. Other unions got some of the crafts, like the carpenters and so forth. But the first time we negotiated for everybody.

Cobble: How come the unions were willing to give up - these workers to the Retail Clerks?

Sills: They had nothing in the department stores. They never had any organization. Nobody had any organization.

Cobble: What about the culinary workers?

Sills: Ah, the culinary workers did, and as I recall we didn't negotiate for the culinary workers because they had organization in the stores. And there was somebody else- the janitors and elevator operators. They had elevators at that time. We never negotiated for those unions that did represent people in the stores.

Cobble: Didn't you at one point negotiate for the warehousemen?

Sills: Yes. We did in the stores.

Cobble: Why were they willing to give up that right?

Sills: They weren't organized. That, as I recall, was the reason. They weren't organized, and they were represented by us. And in subsequent years ~~they~~ we gave up some organization because ~~they~~ other these unions could get better conditions for smaller groups of people if they were in their particular unions. You know they could get better conditions than we could get for them.

Cobble: Do you think that's really true?

Sills: Yes. I think so. Yes. Because #1100 did make dramatic changes and, white it has the best contract in the country, it still had a vast industry of stores surrounding it in the Bay Area that were unorganized. This has always held down the ability to move faster in improvements. 5

Cobble: Couldn't the store use the various crafts unions against each other negotiating separately and giving some raises and some other -

Sills: They were never able to do that in the department stores. They got a lot more. But, see, they weren't key to the operation in the

Sills: department stores. The people in our union were key. We were numerically stronger

Cobble: So you still had power even though you gave up?

Sills: Yes we still had the majority of power, right, by maintaining a majority membership.

There were a lot of strikes and bitter fights to maintain what we had. And the one thing we never gave up, that they always wanted us to give up, was seniority which proved to be a life saver for the union because if they could fire the union members over a period of years and get a whole new group in there who would be able to enjoy the conditions and the wages they would think, why pay union dues, and then -

End of tape three, Interview 2

Cobble: My question was - how did the political -

Sills: Yes. How did the political scene affect the labor movement. How did they participate in the political scene. When we first started to organize the one thing that I remember was that during the Woolworth strike (Warehousemen), a political issue came up in terms of picketing. There was an anti-picketing ordinance in San Francisco. They limited the amount of pickets that you could use which made it less effectiveand made it more difficult to keep people from patronizing, say, a store. So the labor movement took on the issue of repealing that anti-picketing ordinance. It was a real political campaign. ~~And the way~~ They did it in the Woolworth warehouse situation ~~was, while there was mass picketing~~ by using mass picketing to defy the picketing ordinance, they would be arrested and then bailed out immediately and everybody would come back to the picket line. This went on for, oh, a number of weeks.[6] Other than that, I don't recall exactly the time element. The issue came up before the Board of Supervisors and the anti-picketing ordinance. (You know when Woolworth's decided to sit down and negotiate) ~~that~~ broke the back of the anti-picketing ordinance and it was repealed. And there was no rules and regulations regarding picketing. So that's the kind of activity that I recall that was effective as far as labor participation was concerned. This is true on a national scale too. When they organized the basic industries, this had a great effect on repealing a lot of ancient rules and regulations against working people in Congress. I don't know how you would explain it, but that's the kind of effect that existed. To me it was a real [pause]

Sills: changed atmosphere in attitudes of people. So, all combined, this really was one of the exhilerating effects of the labor movement in the thirties - that later became dissipated as they got more stability and became more interested in just their own particular local or international. Became separated from a broader point of view - a broader social point of view and a broader organizing point of view.

Cobble: Now the first negotiations that took place - ~~how~~ who was on the negotiating team?

Sills: We had Jack Shelley and Wendell Phillips, and Jack Shelley was the new (I don't remember the sequence, but I think the new secretary of the Central Labor Council) and very active in organizing and very militant in his outlook. They suggested the hiring of the Melnikow Pacific Coast Labor Bureau people to do the actual negotiations. But then they were involved with us in terms of consulting. And then we had our own negotiating committee and our own officers involved. The Pacific Coast (consultants I guess you would call them now) did the actual negotiation. We, the committee of the union, made the decisions and they carried them out.

Cobble: Was that committee officers and some rank and filers?

Sills: Oh, yes - a large rank and file committee. And everything was voted on. I can't somehow remember what the situation was like in terms of specifics. I don't remember the sequence of events, but I do remember the attitudes. Although we argued and had differences of opinion, once we agreed we all worked together. It seemed to me that kind of a situation. At least at the beginning there was a real feeling that the majority rule decided. Whereas everybody didn't hew to that line - as the local grew older there

Sills: was more and more bitter disputes on policy and decisions. And I was always on the radical side of the issue. I felt that we had to do more than just consolidate our own particular gains. And could and should do more on broader social and political issues. And so, you know, you become catagorized according to your politics. And I was convinced that there had to be broad political participation by the people in order to change some of the rules of society that weren't working well.

I persisted throughout my whole life with this conviction. And consequently it is kind of a hard row to hoe. You begin to see also how important it is not to become too dogmatic in your attitudes and not to become too self-righteous in terms of your relationship with people. It is awfully easy to go into a religious campaign. It is as true in politics as in anything else, the feeling that you are always right. I kind of feel that my attitude always had a lot of pragmatic aspects to it. I liked to move along a certain direction, but I liked to see people moving along with me. And then to do that you have to make some compromises. And it's a process. Democracy is painful - a painful system. You have to give as well as take, in, you know, a real democratic society.

Cobble: Did you find yourself ever in disagreement with the party line?

Sills: No at first, no. I thought they were the best. As I think back I think all the most talented creative people in this country were at one time working together with the Communist party groups [phone rings - pause] to make changes in society, but that this changed over a period of years [tape turned off to answer phone]

Cobble: You were comparing the communist party attitudes in the beginning with later on.

Sills: Yes. Very closely aligned with the necessity to organize the trade union movement. Very helpful in assisting in practical ways of work. And some of the finest people I've ever met were members of the communist party. And they really did an excellent job in helping to organize the labor movement, in giving leadership and helping to organize the labor movement.

And I supported this idea of the need for society to be organized along democratic lines and not, as subsequently developed, because of all the pressures world wide and what not where the Soviet Union became more or less a a country that didn't follow the democratic freedom of expression and so forth. It wasn't allowed in the Soviet Union. It almost seems as if what happened in the clash of ideologies between capitalism and socialism that it took on sort of a paranoic in each country like a death struggle. It shouldn't have been, but which it became. The Soviet Union became more and more a closed type of society. When they invaded Hungary and Czechoslovokia I thought that was the death of a democratic socialism. I didn't support it at all.

Cobble: Did you feel any conflict between being a political person and being involved in the party and being in trade unions?

Sills: Yes. Yes. Because the trade unions - they didn't support the type of socialism that existed in the Soviet Union. They saw the American communist party as supporting number one the Soviet Union before their own country.

~~Cobble: You mean the communist party?~~

Sills: The working people, the trade union movement in this country saw the communist party as supporting the soviet Union under any and all circumstances which, as you look back on the record, they did. They did. This was not acceptable to American workers at all because they saw our system as having a lot more freedom and opportunities available, and they didn't like the closed society that existed in the Soviet Union.

Cobble: How did you feel about that policy of the communist party?

Sills: I supported it because I felt that world wide the Soviet Union was surrounded by countries that wanted to see socialism defeated. And I supported the Soviet Union policies for a long time never seeing that just like our own policies there was national first to them and not international in terms of a democratic socialism developing first. And the other side of the coin was that the capitalists theories in this country and the rest of the world. So it became - the whole cold war - and I became isolated because I really supported a lot of things, as I look back now, that weren't too democratic. In other words, I supported things ~~that~~ because I thought I knew what was good for the trade union movement, and it wasn't necessarily true in the first place, and obviously the American workingclass didn't support it. More of a business trade unionism began to develop. The copying of the way our business community functions became a part of the thinking of the trade union people. And this also did them in. So you might say, at least I feel, that the development of a strong trade union movement in this country suffered

Sills: because of both of these things. They interacted on them. And it didn't have a independent enough policy to challenge the wrong things wherever they showed up in terms of the business community as well as the foreign policies. And I had faith you know. I had faith in things that didn't turn out exactly the way I had envisioned.

Cobble: Getting back to negotiations, was there ever any discussion or debate about the job classifications?

Sills: Oh, very much so. There was a real struggle to upgrade and change and improve the job conditions and classifications, whatever they were, like selling and non-selling and so forth. Yes. There was a real strong feeling about job classifications.

Cobble: Did the jobs that women traditionally did pay less?

Sills: No. Not that I know of.

Traditionally they were paid less so that in terms of catching up there wasn't a closing of the gap in all respects. You see we didn't think in terms of women in a special discrimination that they experienced on the job markets. I mean it never occurred to us in those days. We thought in terms of working people, men and women. But there wasn't any distinction made, so that you might say ~~they~~ DISCRIMINATION carried over. A lot of the lower paying jobs were still in the catagory of - Women, you know, were not accepted in the higher paying jobs. That's true. In other words, the male-female job classifications weren't argued on that basis.

Cobble: Was that issue ever raised?

Sills: No. I don't recall it being raised. Not in those days. It was raised in theory, but

Sills: had no practical application in terms of what was actually taking place in the real world - in terms of the employer and union relationship.

Cobble: What about as a business agent. Did women bring their grievances to you about their job conditions?

Sills: Well I didn't seem to notice any distinction between men and women. I didn't feel there was any difference. It just happened to be the particular job that you were in that the union was very alert in terms of servicing because we felt this was the real key to building a strong union, was to really dig in and get them straightened out in favor of the employee, whatever the issue happened to be. And it didn't - there was no distinction made between male and female. You know, it was just accepted that this was the way it was. And you worked from there. A very pragmatic point of view.

Cobble: Was there one group of workers that had more power in the union than another group?

Sills: The men had more power. They were recognized. The leadership was given to them. If you look in the trade union movement today, you can see how it is reflected. I am just shocked that there isn't even one woman on the executive committee of the AFL-CIO. I know there are some on the staff, but I don't know exactly who they are. I don't think any women hold top positions. And this was true all down through the line. Only the exceptional women like in the Garment workers and in the millinery trades that I remember. Otherwise they were all men. It was just completely staffed. The officers of the union were all men - the constitutional officers.

Cobble: Were the men able to get better raises proportionally for their kinds of jobs?

Sills: They probably did because they had the higher paying jobs to begin with. They were always kept ahead of the women.

Cobble: So there wasn't any attempt to close that gap?

Sills: I don't recall really. I think it was always a percentage increase. So it always meant that they got more comparatively because their wages were higher as I recall it. I am a little afraid to go too much into it, be too definite aabout it, because I don't remember a lot of this. It is too long ago. And the fact is that in my whole life I don't tend to look back. I am always doing something. I am doing different things all the time as far as activity is concerned, throughout my whole life, so that at this point (in my sixties) it gets to be one big jumble of activity.

Cobble: Why don't we move on then to the thirty eight strike. Were there negotiations before the strike was called?

Sills: Oh yes. There were negotiations. I don't recall what the specific issues were. I would not be a good repository of information on that thirty eight strike. I don't recall it that well. Somebody else would have to.

Cobble; Do you remember -

Sills: I know there was a <u>bitter</u> feeling between - I know that they were trying to take away, seniority was one of the things, and we just wouldn't give on that. That was one of the things that forced the issue of a strike. They were determined to break the union and that was the one thing that they could - that was one way that they could break it - by disregarding

Sills: seniority and constantly having new people, the turnover becoming great. I know that that was one of the key issues, but I don't recall a lot of the other details surrounding the actual strike situation.

Cobble: Were you on the picket lines?

Sills: We, the business agents, were very active in terms of helping to man them. But we also had a strike headquarters, a soup kitchen where we served meals to people, strikers. So we were back and forth all the time between what was happening on the picket line and what was happening to the strikers in general. Trying to get support and money -

Cobble: Who did you get support from?

Sills: The other labor unions - very , very good. Thousands and thousands of dollars were donated to help. And then we had to help people if they had particular situations, personal situations and finances. We had to help straighten out. PROBLEMS. We had to postpone payments of certain types, postponing the payments until the strike was settled. We had to make certain arrangements to alleviate the financial burden on the strikers. And we did a lot of talking to other groups. It was on an all around basis. We worked day and night. It was a way of life ~~of~~ FOR us, TO BE all involved with the union.

Cobble: Were you able to have mass picketing?

Sills: Yes. And we got good support from the public in the thirty eight strike, excellent support. It was only in the later years in San Francisco where these differences of opinions in regards to what was taking place in the trade union movement, ~~and~~ THAT the support began to diminish in terms of the broad general public. It was the way they looked at labor. In the thirties it was all sympathy and support for organization and

Sills: the trade unions and what they were doing. Quite a different attitude than exists now.

Cobble: Was there any violence on the picket line?

Sills: I don't recall anything of any significance. A little fisticuffs and things like that. I don't recall any violence.

Cobble: Did you get good support from the women?

Sills: Oh yes. The women have always been the backbone. They have always been the backbone. They are the majority in the industry and always have been. There are a lot of myths that existed in terms of woman - that they were only there temporarily. Most of the members of 1100 have worked in the trade thirty and forty years.

The fact that there was a great betterment of conditions for the women stabilized the industry and kept them working because it really was supportive. It really was the kind of situation where if the husband and wife both worked they had a fairly good income and lived fairly well, or could increase their standard of living with the two incomes and could give their children more opportunity and could give their children better educations and everything - medical care and so forth. It all was a part of it - the fact that the union existed. Otherwise it would have been an industry that had constant turnover and because of the low paying wages and so forth. As I look back that is -

End of first side of tape

Sills: the hallmark. If you have low wages and no working conditions and no benefits, it is the hallmark of the unorganized, unskilled worker who is still living on a poverty level from generation to generation. See, the union organization gave real hope and brought real financial benefits to women and they supported it. They supported it.

Cobble: Do you recall the intervention of William Green's representative, Meyer Lewis.

Sills: I don't. You mean in San Francisco? No, but San Francisco always seemed to be ahead in terms of ideas and policies. And that's because of the high rate of trade union development in this city. And the interaction, the ideas coming out between different unions of whatever industry they represented. There was always a close relationship whereas there was a clash of ideas in terms of where the trade union movement was and where it should go. Still and all it was a communication that made for better organization, stronger trade unionism here. And I know that there was wide difference between what the top AF of L was doing and the local movement here. But over the years it became diffused.

Cobble: How did you feel about the settlement?

Sills: Of the strike? I was disappointed. We really wanted to hold out for the union store, the closed shop. And as I recall I recommended, I really felt very disappointed in the fact that the membership voted to accept the contract and not hold out for the union shop. We weren't strong enough. By thirty eight the employers were really organized. And a lot of their ideas were accepted by a lot of our people. A lot of their ideas in terms of

Sills: (I am not too clear now what I am trying to say here) the education over a period of years, the employers' point of view was deeply imbedded. Because this, after all, was where you make your livelihood. And the feeling was that you had to depend on the employer. That if he wasn't there, you were finished. These kind of things tended to - this plus the fact that this was the deepest part of the depression and money was so important for sustenance. It is quite different now. This had a tendency to water down the militancy.

Cobble: Do you remember (I think it was Halloween night that the contract was ratified) that there was supposed to have been quite a fight at that meeting?

Sills: I don't remember it. That's what's unfortunate. I don't remember it. But I know that when the vote was taken, I know that I went backstage and I cried like I never cried before in my life. "We lost. We lost." We tried to hold out for the union.

Cobble: You were arguing against acceptance of the contract?

Sills: I was arguing against acceptance ~~to~~ OF the contract on the negotiating committee and on the executive board. But then, when they decided to go for it, I was part of the recommendation, I couldn't argue against it. I had ~~the~~ TO accept the majority. The majority OPINION was first I think. I really don't remember the details, and it's too bad because it should be recorded.8

Cobble: How did you get people to go back to work?

Sills: Once the contract was agreed on as the best that we could get that wasn't a problem because everybody wanted their job back. If you didn't go back to work, then you quit

Sills: the industry and went somewhere else. I mean it was as simple as that.

Cobble: Were there any problems with the strike-breakers that had been hired?

Sills: Yes there were problems. But as I recall it the strikebreakers were let go and the union people got their jobs back. There might have been some specific instances where we had to fight to get the strikers back. I am sure there was, but I don't recall what they were, what the specifics were on them. Generally speaking there wasn't anybody who didn't get get back.

Cobble: I have read that there was quite a large amount of antagonism between the scabs and the union people.

Sills: Oh yes. There was a lot of bitterness.

Cobble: And that you had trouble convincing the union members to let the scabs join the union?

Sills: Right. But we had to do that because of the open shop. That had to be fought out subsequently, and it was. They were accepted, those that were retained. Some that were retained, I am sure. It is just too bad I can't remember that.

Cobble: What was the next strike you were involved in?

Sills: Let's seee, thirty nine was the Kress strike. That was the next strike. Then after that I think I left. I wasn't involved. [pause]

I worked on a lot of political campaigns that were launched in San Francisco. Whereas I was also a business agent and working on other issues. And I became very active in this respect. What happened was that I began to feel the stresses and strains, you know,

Sills: of working full time as business agent. And I also began, I remember, to feel that the business agents were the hired employees of the union. They weren't the constitutional officers, and they didn't have as much authority ~~of~~ FOR being effective in the local. And then I isolated myself to a great extent by the left positions that I took on many political issues, trying to get the union to go along.

And all those stresses and strains became too much for me and my health was beginning to break down. And I decided that I couldn't take it any more. That's when I was offered a job in the union office. And I worked in the union office for a couple of years, until I got married.

And then I was always involved in political issues mainly.

Cobble: What kind of stresses and strains?

Sills: Well, it's hard to say, NOW but I think that - I know that the battles that took place took a lot of effort and energy. And then the frustrations of what you could do and what you couldn't do on the job as business agent.

Cobble: What were some of those?

Sills: You see, I don't recall specifically. I can speak generally. There was a lot of dissatisfaction beginning to develop. The union was limited in what it could do. That's where stresses were. And the employers, you know, were always hard, ~~though~~ NOSED ESPECIALLY in terms of getting an agreement on whatever issue you were fighting. FOR This was part of the stresses and strains, the frustrations, because you didn't - the employer had much more power on the job than you did. And there was always, since the very day that the union was recognized,

Sills: there was always this bitterness and antagonism on the part of the employers. So you had to fight every inch of the way And I think a lot of the stresses and strains came from that. Then a lot came from the policies of the union would develop, and there was disagreement. Like Larry Vail and I really clashed in terms of what should be done and what shouldn't be done. There ~~was~~ IS more of a conciliatory attitude, THESE DAYS. And I was always more militant in terms of policy and procedure on the job and antagonism to the employer.

Cobble: What do you think could have been done to strengthen the union's position?

Sills: Well, you see, there you have to remember the specifics, Sue, and I am <u>just</u> at a loss. I cannot. I just don't recall. It would just be an attempt on my part to mix my thinking now with what happened then. And it may not be factual. I just don't remember, and I don't like to get involved in that - my own opinion now.

Cobble: Did you ever consider running for another office?

Sills: Never.

Cobble: One question I have. I've seen pictures of Woolworth's sit down strikes. I guess they took place in New York. Was there any discussion of using that tactic here?

Sills: I don't recall. We had the support of the public here in our first efforts, in our first strikes. It was only later that they became more antagonistic for a variety of reasons, both politically and socially supportive. San Francisco was highly organized in the thirties. Except for white collar, office workers, the rest of the industries

Sills: were organized. So it was a different mileau. It was a different situation than what took plade here. You didn't have to use those kind of tactics as you would in a large city like New York with millions of people either on one side or the other.

Cobble: What happened to change the attitudes of the public?

Sills: I think there were a lot of things that happened, particularly in terms of how the trade union movement developed, and its outlook being confined to always - and it built up over a period of years to where you saw it most vividly in the strike of the city workers here [in San Francisco] where there was a feeling of I get mine and to hell with the rest of the guys. ~~I mean~~ That can describe the attitude, I think, which eroded the support. There are ~~And for~~ a variety of reasons that it ~~did~~ developed. ~~there is a lot of things that would move in on that if you were - I don't feel able to discuss it on a more specific basis.~~

Cobble: Do you remember cooperating with a group called the League of Women Shoppers?

Sills: I remember that name, but I don't remember anything specific about it. Who were they?

Cobble: I read that they were a group that cooperated with the union to help boycott the stores. There was something called the button game.

Sills: Where they would ask for the union button? Oh yes. I remember that. We all wore buttons on the job. Yes. There was a big drive to ask for the union clerk which made a big difference in terms of commissions to sales people and support of the union.

Cobble: It was interesting how a community group cooperated with the union in an organizing drive.

Sills: Yes. 1100 had always reached out since its inception to the community. Because of the

Sills: very nature of the type of industry it is, it had to have the support of the public. So that all kinds of things, and this was one of them. I remember the name, but I don't remember anything specific about it.

Cobble: What kind of strategies did you use to reach out to the public?

Sills: As I remember this took a lot of thinking and effort. I think the basic strategy and technique was that the only way we could get better conditions was if the public supported us. I mean that was the basic. So we used every type of idea that seemed to work or would work well. We tried all kinds of efforts to reach the public and develop sympathy on - and probably telling the truth about what the conditions were like was the biggest thing. It still was low paid compared to the skilled trades. It still was not one hundred percent organized, and this had its effect on what kind of power you had to enforce better conditions and get better wages. I don't really recall. I should really read that book. I should get ahold of that book that Larry wrote. I've never been able to find a copy of it, and you say there is one at Mills [college] library.

Cobble: Oh, there is an interview with Larry Vail. I read that.

Sills: I've asked him for the book many times. We have become - he invited me to his - when he retired he got a big party by a lot of labor officials and he invited me. And I made a little talk about how the union started and what part he played in it, which was a very important part. So the reconciliation - we were not real close - never will be. But there was a more friendly atmosphere since he retired [laughter].

Sills: But the point is. I lost the point. I've asked him for the book and he will never give me the book. So I just haven't been able to get hold of it. I don't see it anywhere - published anywhere. I suppose if I made a real effort to get it I could. But if you run across it, I'd sure like it.

Cobble: The book that he wrote on the history of the union? Or the Interview with him?

Sills: It must be the same thing - a book that he wrote on the history of the union from his point of view.

Cobble: Were you involved in the forty-one strike?

Sills: No. By then I was - I got married on June 21st, 1941. And I met my husband, who was an active communist party member, at a party over in Marin. And we just sort of took to each other. He always laughs and says he won me in a poker game, or I won him in a poker game. I forget what happened. Anyway we became acquainted and we lived together first for some months to see if we really were compatible before we got married.

We believed in the idea of working for a change in society. And he was a veteran of the Spanish civil war. He came back. And he was a seaman. He was also a product of the depression. He went through his junior year at New York City College and had to quit because of the depression. And then started bumming around the country from freight train to freight train until he finally ended up getting a job on a ship, and followed that for a long time. He decided he wanted to settle down, and stayed in San Francisco where we got married in forty one.

We went to Reno to get married. We didn't believe in a big to-do about it. And the next

Sills: day Nazi Germany declared war against the U.S.S.R. And we decided, "My God, we've got to come home. We've got to help in the war effort to defeat Hitler." So we cut our honeymoon short and came home. We were really dedicated nuts as far as politics was concerned. We were really involved. It was our whole life. It was the most important thing in our life in terms of what we did.

And I remember moving into Saturn street. And we lived in that place - We didn't care about possessions. We didn't even think in terms of accumulating enough money so you could get this, that, or the other thing in terms of material assets. We cared about working with people to change things so that all of us would have a better world to live in, broadly speaking.

He became a member of the Piledrivers Union and worked for many years as a pilebutt. And then became a carpenter, and a contractor late in life.

Cobble: How did people react when you were living together?

Sills: There was no big to-do about it. People that we knew who were our friends all felt the same way. There wasn't any big public issue or private issue. Nobody advertised things like that. Just a part of the nature of our lives - you would call it liberated now, I guess. And if anybody said anything we never heard about it. And then we decided that we were compatible, really cared for each other, and we decided to get married,

Then I began working in the stores. I had the idea that if I was in a store that I could organize people to really change the policies of the union which were beginning to go in a different direction, a more conservative direction.

Sills: And I did have a lot of influence, but not enough to - What I didn't realize is what was important to people, and I can only give you a little story of where I was shocked into reality, so to speak, by how most people feel about life. If they improve their living conditions. If they are able to accumulate a lot of - like another car or a dishwasher or a beautiful this or that or the other thing, that this is where their life is spent. And if there is an improvement in their material existence, this is what life is all about. You already begin to see the younger generation now feeling differently, I think. This isn't the be all and end all of life. There are other things that are more important like solving some of the issues that have been around since the world began. But what brought it to mind is when I was involved in a ~~a school, a~~ campaign to integrate the schools. The Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Council was very active, and I became ~~the~~ its school's committee chairman. That's when my daughter was in school, and we made - first I am getting ahead of myself -

End of tape

Sills: I was trying to tell a little story of what really brought the reality of the situation ~~in~~ TO mind, ITS when I was involved as a chairman of the school committee. We had a professor at State who lived in the Haight-Ashbury. He lived on the . He had five kids, and two of them were in Dudley Stone. We got a hundred parents involved. My daughter was going to McKinley here. She was in elementary school. We developed a program where we could integrate. He was really knowledgeable in terms of education. I forgot his name. I forgot what his field was. I think it was - Anyway, I can't remember it at the moment, He developed, in consultation with our committee, a program where you could pair schools and you wouldn't have to ~~use~~ Develop a big bussing, PROJECT across town. And you could change the system so that it would work and it would have BEEN a natural development for integration. But the opposition, I forget their names, they were against integration. They had a cover up organization that used a different name. They didn't come out and say we are against integration for neighborhood schools. Well, we heard that they were going to hold a meeting up at Clarendon one Sunday, which is in midtown terrace, to get people to support the ~~name of the~~ NEIGHBORHOOD schools and to oppose our program which was being presented to the board of education as a way of integrating the schools, and an effective way without the use of citywide bussing. So we heard that they were going to hold a meeting in opposition to this. So we decided that a few of us on the committee would go up there and ask to speak and tell them our point of view. That's all we wanted to do. But when we got up there (and in

Sills: the meantime the school board, people of the school board had granted them the use of the Clarendon school for their meeting) decided they betternot get involved. They wouldn't open the school. You know they kept it closed JUST because we were going to be there. So we went across the street to where the paved over reservior was, and we tried to hold an open air meeting. And the adrenalin was running high. And I remember these parents who lived in THAT NEIGHBORHOOD? - they said to us, "Why do you think we slaved and worked and suffered to buy a home here, to get away from the ghetto and the poverty. THIS IS WHY! And now you want to bring the poverty to our school. You want to bring these kids who have no - " Well, they didn't say it that way - you want to bring the ghetto to us and we've been fighting all our life to get away from the ghetto. This kind of an attitude is what really motivates people. It never motivated me in my whole life. But I'm just one of a minority obviously. So I was shocked into seeing that this was a stumbling block to making progress. They didn't realize that their little white schools were NOT really a good education, and that if they had combined, if they really worked together well, they would be able to raise the level not only of the kids in the ghetto, but also their own they would be able to find out a lot of fine things about the poor that they had never been in contact with; some of the good ideas that they could impart to them. This to me is what democracy was all about, a mixture, taking the good, and giving opportunity and so forth. But this is where I had my eyes opened. I began to see that people - I always thought that you could convince by a rational argument. That isn't necessarily so. People have their traditions,

Sills: their myths, and their backgrounds and their ideas that don't have anything to do with rationality under certain circumstances. In politics particularly.

Cobble: When you got married did you think that you would keep on working?

Sills: On and off, yes I did. I was working at the time. I was going to work until we adopted Joan in forty nine when she was five days old. Then I felt I had to stay home for a couple of years. But up until that time I was always working at something or other. One kind of job or another.

Cobble: Why did you decide to adopt?

Sills: Because I had three miscarriages, and finally an ectopic pregnancy which means that the foetus was growing in the tube and you have to be operated on. Then you only have one tube and it is very difficult to get pregnant. I just couldn't make it. I never was able to - that tube was closed, and you know I went through all kinds of things to conceive, but it didn't work. It was a great disappointment in my life that I couldn't have a child.

Then we were very friendly with Bob and Decca Treuhaft when they lived here in San Francisco for many, many years. And they heard of this young woman who was having a child. And we were talking about raising a family. And Bob, being a lawyer, made the arrangements. So we decided to adopt in January, 1949. We probably decided in '48.

Cobble: Did you want to have children very soon after you got married?

Sills: No. It wasn't until about seven years, I think. We were too involved in political activities. In the issues of the day, you might say. And we had a very broad social life

Sills: too. We knew a lot of people. And we were involved in a lot of campaigns, one after the other.

Cobble: How did your being pregnant and then having a child affect your work?

Sills: I sort of went - I would go full blast for a couple of years. Then I would begin to feel exchausted. And then I would stay home for a while.

And I know how much both of us wanted to have a child. So when we decided to adopt, we decided at least, for the first two years it would be important for me to stay home.

You know the women always gave in to the practical necessities of running a home, doing the shopping. We did all these things besides work. We didn't realize it until lately. Whereas we shared, some work the women did most of everything. They worked the hardest. The man just went to work on his job. Then came home, and everything was done for him. So it was a natural thing that we felt it was important that for the first two years I should be with Joan.

When she started going to nursery school (two years old, I think) then I started going back to work.

You see I was never aware of the fact, and I became aware of it rather late in life, that I didn't have any skills. I had not developed any skills to better my own employment possibilities. I knew general office work. What I was very good at was getting people together and working to solve a particular problem. I liked people. I got along well with them. I could conceptionalize what had to be done and why it was important and take certain steps. I was a very good natural organizer because of my experience in the union.

Sills: But this is not a marketable thing, particularly in a woman. Where if a man had this ability he would be grabbed up for some kind of well paying job. But a woman, no, and particularly a radical woman. So a lot of this didn't come to consciousness until late in life. As I look back on it I see. So the jobs I had were all either jobs on a political committee, running a campaign, and very low pay. It was never involved with financial success. The first job that I had that was good, that I really began to make some money at, (I was always working in a store or I was working on some political campaign where it was low pay because it was mostly volunteer plus expenses). And we just didn't care about that. We really enjoyed our life in terms of political involvement. We lived in a community that was working toward a goal. It was very important to us. That's the one thing I miss about not being involved in a particular party these last years of my life is that sense of community and working together. I liked that. Do you think we ought to stop?

Cobble: Well, I have a few more questions.

Sills: Sure.

Cobble: What was your husband's attitude towards the role of women?

Sills: He was brought up under the traditional thing. And whereas we shared - he had a good attitude in theory, but in practice [laugs] it never quite meant liberation. In other words there's a lot of things that impinge on our lives that happen regardless of what we think or what we do or anything because of the type of society we live in. So that you don't have control over a lot of things. So I never blamed him. It was just the situation. In other words

Sills: we struggled with whatever situation we faced, and we worked at it together. But it never meant liberation for the woman. He was far in advance of a lot of men. I never was treated like a lot of women were treated by their men. I was treated very well.

Cobble: You were starting to say you really had a good paying job until -

Sills: I became managing director here at Glenridge, and I had that good paying job for one month [laughs] until they threw me out.

Cobble: We could stop for today on that note.

End of Interview Three

Begin Interview Four - August 1, 1977

Sills: after the thirties, after the organization of the clerks took place. It* didn't develop with a mass membership type organization until then.

Cobble: So that's why you didn't turn to them first?

Sills: Well there was only one little old man who was the president, and had been for years. And he didn't seem to be with what was taking place. It was a new upsurge. He wasn't a part of that at all. He was an old-timer. He just plodded along and as I recall (Deseyette his name was) he wasn't - after the organization began in the Retail Clerks all over the country it wasn't very long before he was retired. And new younger people took over, which I think is a very important point. It goes very well with ~~today~~ today what has to be done. I think a lot of the younger people have to be given more responsibility and more leadership positions. They are with what is happening today whereas the older

* Retail Clerks International Union.

Sills: generation, it's inevitable that you just lose track.

Cobble: Continuing with some of the things we were talking about last week, how did you first learn about sex?

Sills: I think in discussion with my friends from high school. That's the way I learned about sex. And also I think it was a natural development. Anything specific, I don't remember having dwelt on - a lot of reading. I suppose reading helped a lot. You know I read a lot of books. I couldn't tell you right now what kind of books they were, but they were ~~more~~ mostly popular stuff. So I think you learned your sexual ideas, you developed your sexual ideas based on the current media that existed at that time which was radio, although I didn't listen to the radio very much. But reading, I think, was the main influence - reading and discussions with my friend I would say were the main ways I learned about sex.

Cobble: Did you ever talk to your mother about sex?

Sills: No. As I recall we didn't have any discussion on sexual matters. It just wasn't discussed. I don't know why. As I look back I don't know why it wasn't, ~~but~~ FOR there was no reason it shouldn't be. I guess it was the way my mother was brought up and that's the way everybody handled the question - a popular concept of handling sex questions.

Cobble: What about when you first got your period?

Sills: I was frightened to death, and then my mother told me it was a natural thing, after the fact. It never probably occurred to her to say anything about it before.

Cobble: So you didn't have any idea what was happening?

Sills: No. Although I felt no pain I felt that something - it was frightening to me because I thought there was something medically wrong. It never occurred to me that it was a natural development in my life.

Cobble: What did she tell you?

Sills: I don't really remember. Only that there was nothing wrong. It was a perfectly natural thing. I don't really recall what she said.

Cobble: Did you talk to her much about your relationships with men?

Sills: I never discussed any of my affairs - I was always too busy. I was always too involved. I remember, as I look back, my poor mother - all three of us different ages. She was like a servant. She would have dinner ready for any of us whatever time we came home. We would rush in and rush out again. We were always involved in outside activities that had no connection with her life. It was a developing, what you would call now a lifestyle. And it had no connection with her or her background. We never spent much time although we did go to family affairs whenever they occurred, which ~~was on~~ became more and more rare occasions. She was left pretty much alone outside of her own friends and family. So there was a separation there. It was like a lot of immigrant families. This is what happened. The younger generation wanted to be Americans and therefore they cut off - a lot of them did and a lot of them didn't. A lot of them kept a close family relationship. In our particular family we didn't have that except that my mother was always there. But we didn't have that closeness, and I think the main reason was if she had been literate

Sills: and if she had read and if she had kept up with what was going on, then there would have developed a different relationship within the family. But as it was it was a separate type of thing.

Cobble: Were there other older women whom you looked to as role models?

Sills: I really looked to the men as role models. I really did. That seemed to me to be where the action was. The education and the whole concentration of our society was built around men being the leadership. And I just accepted it. It seemed like they are there, and I never began to challenge it until I read some of the political history of what took place in the rest of the world, and also in America in terms of women's movement. Then I began to understand that women were discriminated against. The way they were brought up. You thought in terms of you either get a job for a while and then you get married. That seemed to be the natural - and you raised a family, and it was just all supposed to work out in that order. And there wasn't much conscious discussion of it until I became involved in political, particularly the left movement, and I began to understand a lot of things in terms of women. And there was a program of ideas that were developed theoretically, but it was never carried out in practice. In other words women were always subordinate to the men. Even within the radical movement that's true.

Cobble: How would you compare the way women were treated in the radical movement to the culture at large?

Sills: I would say that leadership positions were given. They [pause] centered around doing all of the necessary work that has to be done in a movement that is not the predominant group; that doesn't have all of the assists that

Sills: that our society gives to its men leadership. The men who are in business leadership or government leadership, they are always given secretaries. They are given the whole - in other words you are given the wherewithall to provide yourself with the kind of human tools, the brains. And women's brains, I think, were used throughout history to enhance the reputation of men. They did all the work in the background. A lot of the work. I don't say men didn't do a lot. But a heck of a lot of the ideas and things came from women. Women were never recognized by society as being given credit for the new ideas and what not. They were always - and women didn't - you were always so interested in the goals and the means to an end that you didn't consider what was actually happening. And this was a mistake because women, if they were recognized, may have, and still will I think, contribute a great deal to the change for the betterment of society because of their, more sensitivity I think to human needs I think woemn have I don't know whether it's innate or biological or what, but I think they do have it. And it might have something to do with the fact that they've had to struggle so hard all their lives. I mean this develops this kinds of characteristics.

As I look back on my mother I seem to have more negative thoughts. There were very good qualities in my mother in terms of her responses and instincts and so forth; a kind of shrewdness that developed because you had to struggle all the time. But it only went so far because it was cut off from development in terms of lack of education. The main thing not being able to read. And therefore one's life is limited, when you are brought up under that kind of atmosphere.

End of first side of tape

Cobble: When you got married, did you think you would continue working?

Sills: Yes. Yes. At that time I was very involved politically with the political ideas of the day and my husband felt the same way. We were more or less agreed on what was going to be important focuses in our lives. And it wasn't necessarily work. There was no effort made to develop a career of any kind. We were convinced that there were going to be vast political changes in our society because of the involvement of thousands and thousands of people in the country ~~toward~~ who were organizing and wanting changes in the way our society operated. We thought that within, say twenty years at the most, that there would be a basic change in our society. In other words we wouldn't have a capitalist society. It would evolve into some kind of a socialist society.

Cobble: Then you saw your future in terms of that Not so much in personal terms?

Sills: That's right. And as a matter of fact we never - one indication of it is that we have never accumulated anything materially. When we got married we lived in a house with a card table, a chair, and a bed. And it has always been that way. This has always come last. "If we ever get enought money, we will do such and such." But it wasn't the important focus in our lives. The important focus was the human relationships that we developed. ~~The~~ OUR relationships with people ~~that we developed~~ was the focus of our lives.

And it was very exciting because we were in touch with some of the most creative people in the Bay Area. They were really the people with ideas, the writers. At that time we were called Bohemians because we had advanced ideas

Sills: on sex. We had advanced ideas on everything, politically and what not. And we lived this way. And it was a feeling of community that doesn't exist today because we were all working toward the same goal. And what we didn't see was there was a huge upsurge around the ideas of, say, the Communist Party; a huge support developed for the ideas. What we didn't see is that over the years (we didn't see it until much later in our lives) the most creative people dropped out because they saw the limitations of the party; that rhetorically it's supposed to be something ~~that~~ representing what was really an American movement developing toward socialism, but actually what it was - there was a control that exerted itself. Probably because of the strong connection between the first socialist country being born in the Soviet Union and a desire to protect that country. And it went overboard, you know, went overboard in that direction so that there was nothing that anone could do to change that. There was many, many attempts, and people would be thrown out and be vilified. I could tell you so many stories - that if you just had faith - that the ends justified the means. And this is a political theory that is devastating. It can just kill anything really good developing in a social or political movements, I think, We never dreamt that it was going to take that turn.

Cobble: As long as you have the right ideology you don't have to take responsibility for anything that happens.

Sills: It's like a religious fervor. You believe in god and god will take care of everything, and that's all you have to do; that you are not responsible to anything above that. You have no relationship to it. I can't explain it! But this is the way the world was developing. You

Sills: have to be realistic about it too; that it isn't easy to change a society like ours, particularly such a vast country with such a vast amount of wealth, vast resources and vast everything compared to the rest of the world. So you don't see this until much later in life. At least this is the way I now feel.

Cobble: So you feel that because you had this political commitment, that that made you think differently in terms of your role; that you would have much more of a role outside the home. That because you had this political commitment, that that was more important than the attitudes you would have towards living in a home.

Sills: Oh yes.

Cobble: When you were talking about having more advanced ideas about sex, saw yourself as a bohemian, how were those ideas different ~~from~~ the larger culture?

Sills: Oh, I don't know that they were so different except we were more open about it; that we openly discussed it and it became a natural thing. In the larger culture it was hidden. I am sure there were all kinds of affairs taking place [phone rings - tape turned off]

Cobble: You were explaining how it wasn't so much the behavior in terms of sex that was different, but the attitudes and the openness.

Sills: Yes, I think so. Because I think that what was done covertly took place, open affairs between men and women. Men and women living together without marriage. But it was very secretive, a secretive kind because of the moral prohibitiveness. I mean it wasn't out in the open at all. You can see now that this was a perfectly normal, natural, relationship between men and women, People were punished, I guess,

Sills: if they came out in the open, one way or another, in the larger society. Or could be punished because of the prevailing ideas of how one should live and what one should do, and not do. Do's and don'ts. I think our lives then were more, in every way, more black and white. You could see there were good guys and there were bad guys. So to speak, using that as an example. And it was more clear, and now in our society it is not. There are so many different shades of things, greys and what not. It is a much more complex type of thing than existed. There is much more happening; ~~much~~ MANY more different ideas. So it is very difficult to latch on to what you think. There is no more good or bad. There is a lot of in between, and there is a lot of -

Cobble: How do you think you came to develop these advanced ideas about sex and people living together?

Sills: I thought it was a perfectly natural thing. It was right. [laughs] It sounds kind of naive now, but you just felt right. And more or less all my life I followed, is it good for people, or is it bad for people. Will it help us make a better community and world, or will it not. I've always used that sort of yardstick to ~~what I~~ practice, what I Preached, the way I live.

And then being married. You see my husband is very much - he is an intellectual. He has a good mind, and he is a real student. He wanted to be a sociologist. He never got past his junior year at ~~New York State University~~ City College in New York. He is very bright, and this is what he wanted to be. But he never made it because of the depression, and he started bumming around the country. And he finally latched on to some work as a seaman. And he went to sea. And he was also a member of the International

Sills: Brigade, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain. And he came through that experience. Fantastic. He's always so damn rational that sometimes I could scream. I am much more neurotic [laughter] more emotional. There is probably some neurotic in ~~it~~ him too because who in our society isn't neurotic now because of a lot of the things that happen that we have no control over. But we always discussed things openly. And we always had to make compromises and choices of will we do this or will we do that. And this is the way our relationship developed.

Cobble: How did you make those major decisions?

Sills: It was a joint venture I would say. But I think he had a great influence over me. I wouldn't fight with him on a lot of things because I recognized that this was the sensible way of doing it. I could never win an argument with him on a topic of political or anything else as far as ideas were concerned. He was always much more agile in this department. [laughs]. So we were sort of a combination of a doer and a thinker relationship. He liked to read a lot although all his life he has worked very hard. He got into the Piledrivers union here and he became a pilebutt. He had ~~no~~ not much aptitude for it, but he became a pilebutt and he became a carpenter, and he struggled along with that, whereas he really should have been a lawyer, or he should have been something where the brain ~~exists~~ is used; like a teacher. This is what I think now.

Cobble: What kind of disagreements did you have?

Sills: In our relationship? That's what I don't recall. One tends to remember all the good things, and not the battles that took place. [pause] I think I was always more easy going in our relationship, more giving, giving in. At least that's what other people tell me. ~~At least that's~~

Sills: what other people tell me. I really trust his judgement. But I think it's also a desire to be taken care of. You don't always want to be in a position where you have to make decisions, decisions, all the time. In a marriage relationship it has to be both ways and as I look back on it, it was - I mean he acted like any traditional male in our society. You know their mothers don't bring them up to do anything like take care of the house or to do anything around the house. They expect all this is going to be done, and as women we fall right into the position of, you know, yeah, we'll do it. And as I look back, of course I was blessed with a lot of energy up until the time I became diabetic about fifteen years ago. So I didn't mind. I had a lot of energy. I was very quick and I had good organizing ability, and I would take care of what needed to be taken care of as far as the house was concerned. And that was it. It wasn't a big thing.

I must say Ben would be very agreeable to any kind of - you know, if we could have afforded - a lot of times I had somebody clean the house when I was working, who helped in cleaning the house. And he helped. He will do things now too. So I can say that there was a recognition in our relationship that women were exploited. And there was agreement that it shouldn't be so. But you weren't able to overcome a lot of the lack of facilities that existed for women.

I know that when we decided to adopt a child and I stayed home with Joan (we got Joan when she was five days old) and I stayed home until she was about two, close to two, and then we looked around for a nursery school. And she got into a co-op nursery up on Potrero Hill. And it was a wonderful thing for her and

Sills: for me too because then I went back to work. And I liked to be out of the house. I didn't like the role of just being a mother. I had to have more than that. And I saw that I did. But at the same time all her needs were taken care of and - we always had kids around - we always had people around. It wasn't an isolation ~~of~~ from a people relationship at all. We were always involved with people.

Cobble: Did you want to have children?

Sills: Yes. I wanted to very much after about seven years of marriage.And we tried and tried. I had three miscarriages. No, two miscarriages and one ectopic. The foetus grows in the tube, and I had to have my tube removed. And after that it was very difficult. That was closed, and I used to have to go and have it blown open which was a painful kind of thing to try and get pregnant. And we tried everything, the temperature thing, because we wanted very much to have a family. Yes. It was a very strong feeling on both of our parts.

Cobble: Did you want to have children when you first married?

Sills: No. It was after about seven years or eight years of marriage we wanted to have a family.You see I didn't get married until I was about twenty-six, twenty-five or twenty-six. And I was already into my thirties.

Cobble: What changed your attitude?

Sills: I think it's a growing recognition, a growing development. If a marriage - to me a marriage either grows or it's cut off and it's finished. And its a process of adjustment and relationships developing. And it either grows - and if it grows, then raising a family becomes a part of it, a very strong - it's a natural biological part - is my guess. And we wanted to have

Sills: a family.

Cobble: I was thinking that maybe the attitudes were different when you first got married in the early forties.

Sills: No. I don't think so. I think the strongest development against raising children came in recent times rather than in the past. I think that in the past there was always a feeling for family.

Cobble: Did you practice birth control?

Sills: Yes I did.

Cobble: How did you find out about that?

Sills: I don't remember. I guess through friends. Through friends. Yes. And they used a pessary. That was the method of birth control. Oh yes we practiced that. So I am assuming that we didn't want children in the early stages. We were too busy with more important things [laughs]

Cobble: Do you want to add anything before we go on?

Sills: No. I can't think of anything unless it comes up later.

Cobble: OK. I'd like to ask a few questions about your work during ~~during~~ the war. How did you come to be a machinist?

Sills: I'm trying to remember how that development took place. We were discussing women going into the war effort. As a matter of fact, we got married on June 21st, 1941. The next day the Soviet Union was attacked by Hitler. And we got married in Reno. And we decided we were going to have a honeymoon. I forgot where we were going. Probably around Lake Tahoe. So we cut our honeymoon short, came back, because we thought we would be needed in the war effort. And I think there were discussions within radical circles about the role of women, and that this was a time when women should really be allowed to get into the work force. I know that there was a lot of discussion about the role of women then. But it was all theoretical. It never came

Sills: down into actual confrontations except on a very ~~small~~ NARROW basis, you know individual women fighting to get into a particular career or something. These were always the outstanding people, the ones that had a lot of talent. And naturally what happens if you are a talented individual, usually if you have an exceptional talent, you will be allowed into the mainstream of the business world or the art world or anything else. This we've always done. This opportunity still exists I think. It's the ones who could develop maybe exceptionally in their particular field, if they were given the opportunity to start at an early enough age, that we don't recognize as a very important part and a very important contribution that could be made to society by women is the way I feel. We cut IT off too young. I think that a lot of people could develop a lot of talents; that the women particularly could develop a lot of talents if they get into it early enough.

Cobble: When did you start working as a machinist?

Sills: I don't remember. I remember that there was a discussion. This other gal, Florence Hicks, and I. And I don't remember the particular circumstances ~~around~~ SURROUNDING IT, but we knew Hook and Dillon who were officials of the Machinists union. And I don't know. We must have been ~~in~~ AT some kind of an affair where they were talking about some of the women coming in and getting training. And we said yes, we want to be a part. I don't remember exactly how it happened.

Cobble: Were you still working at the union office.

Sills: No. I wasn't working at the union office. I think I was involved more in political campaigns of one sort and another. And it was through this probably, saying that now is the time to get women into these higher paying jobs for the first time.

Sills: So Florence and I were - I got book number one and she got book number two in Local 68 of the Machinists union. We were the first women that were allowed in.

We got jobs at General Engineering and I'll never forget there were some funny incidents. I just wish I could remember ~~-~~ more specifically the men had to show us how to do everything. And they would play a lot of jokes by sending us to the tool department to check out various tools that were non existent. The usual stuff that rookies get - used to get anyway. And we were very interested and we learned rapidly how to run a lathe. I think we ran lathes most of the time.

PELTON
and Waterwheel was the second place I worked.

See, my husband was drafted. And he went to the East Coast. And he was sent around. Of course he had military experience but - and some of the guys who had the same political background, radical background, got different treatment depending upon where they were. It wasn't a uniform type of thing. A lot of them weren't given a chance to become officers. He was sent to training. But then his political record would catch up with him. They always had him training for something. And he was sent all over the country. And of course we wanted very much to be together. And I ~~was~~ became sort of like a camp follower. It was one way I got to see the rest of the UnitedStates. ~~was that~~ I'd save money and then when I had enough money I'd take - I remember the City of San Francisco (Train)

End of Tape Five

Sills: - - transportation priorities ~~that~~ were given. It was hard for the average person to get a reservation on a train. Most of them were being used for military purposes ~~and~~ and FOR the transportation of goods and materials. So we knew some of the people on the Southern Pacific, some of the track men. Anyway, we would get in - they would have a certain amount of seats left open, first come, first served AND-* [phone rings - tape shut off] -

One thing I should say when I talk about my husband - he has a highly developed sense of humor which helps in our relationship, our marriage relationship. I am more of a serious PERSON - I have a sense of humor but it's not SPONTANEOUS - it's a reactive sense of humor to other people and things. This is a saving grace, I would say, in a lot of situations in life and in our marriage PARTICULARLY that if we were able to laugh at ourselves and other things that happened. So he was in the army and he was being sent - let's see - I spent, without going into a lot of detail about it - but it indicates that I was very much TORN - there was a division. I didn't spend all my time doing political things. I had a strong tie to my marriage. So I would work and save up money, and then go back East and spend a month or so from work. Sort of take a leave of absense. So I spent time on Cape Cod. I spent time in New York. I spent time in Boston, and in Gulfport, Mississippi. In New Orleans I was able to get a job making SOME simple tool and dies - what was the name of that company? Consoliated Vultee aircraft company. He was training on Lake Ponchatrain. So thatI combined working wherever I could and spending time with him.

*they used to ask me laughingly if I was commuting to & from New York City.

Sills: Finally he became ~~so~~ very disgusted. He wanted to be sent overseas and they would always cut him off and they would send him someplace else for another training. So finally what he did, was audacious, He got away with it. Of course we were always bold and brash about a lot of things, the way we lived and everything. So that we, also made a lot of things happen by being concerned about it and doing something about it. So he went and he wrote to somebody in Washington and said "You need seamen, and I am an experienced seaman." And he went over the head of the army officers and got away with it. I forgot who he wrote to. But anyway, there was a request for him to be transferred out of the army and into the merchant marine. And he was. And he went to the South Pacific and he was in the - he became a second mate. And he has very fascinating stories to tell, regarding what happend to him.

Cobble: I want to get back to your experiences during the war. The training process thatyou had as a machinist - was that a formal process that all the women went through? Did they have a special kind of training?

Sills: No. You got on the job training. On the job training was what it was as I recall. And I don't remember a lot of the details, but that is the way we were trained, on the job. How to do a specific job, and you did it. You were shown and there was somebody working with you - a journeyman-until you knew your job. And when you knew your job, you were on your own. That's the way it developed.And I know Florence, she moved to Los Angeles after the war, ~~and~~ when she got married, and she worked as a machinist for a long time until they slowly worked all the women out of the industry because of the growing unemployment and the

Sills: job situation had started to tighten up.Then they got all the women out. She was one of the last women who stayed in the industry working as a machinist. She was very good. She developed real skills at it. And afterwards she became a teacher. She is now a teacher and has been for a long time. Went back to school, got her degree and started teaching.

Cobble: Did women have problems learning the job?

Sills: I don't think so. I don't recall any problems learning the job.

Cobble: How did you find the work?

Sills: I liked it. I liked the physical aspects of it, and I liked the pay.[laughs] The pay was very good. That's about all I can remember unless you have anything you want to know.

Cobble: How did you feel when the war ended? Did you expect to continue working?

Sills: You see that's kind of hazy. I don't remember. No as a machinist, I didn't. I was always involved in some kind of political organization campaign. You know, around political issues whether it was in defense of this or for that, againist this. I don't remember the specific campaigns, but I was always asked to work on campaigns.

Cobble: Were you active in the machinists union?

Sills: I wasn't active at all. I don't even remember going to a meeting.

Cobble: Were other women you were working with? Did they take part in union activity?

Sills: In my experience, there was only Florence and I. There wasn't a mass hiring of women. There were just certain women, I guess, who were like us who happened to hit the job market at the right time. There weren't too many women in the machinists #68. There were other machinists locals where there were a lot of women, #1327, or something like that,

Sills: had a lot of women. Production workers were women.

Cobble: Did you get to know these women at all?

Sills: No. See, #68 was all men. I don't remember any women in it except Florence and I. As I say, she went down South and she transferred to another local there. And she worked in the industry for quite a few years. I didn't. I left it after my husband got back. And I don't recall the subsequent events that happened around that particular time.

Cobble: Do you remember being particular encouraged or discouraged to take part in union activities?

Sills: No. I don't remember it one way or another.

Cobble: Do you have any recollection of what kind of lay off policy the union evolved after the war?

Sills: Seniority. Strict seniority, which meant that any of the newcomers were out, and that would include women being the first to be laid off. Strict seniority.

Cobble: Do you remember any cases of men bumping women where they didn't have seniority over the women?

Sills: I wasn't involved after the war with the machinists, and I don't know what took place. But I imagine that it happened. I imagine it happened all over. I remember vaguely some stories about the shipyards particularly where the women were laid off. But, generally speaking, there was seniority that held sway. And obviously it would bump the women off first.

Cobble: Can you describe exactly what you did?

Sills: I think we did repetitive work. We did the same thing. We machinied a certain item, whatever it happened to be(I don't remember what it was even) for General Engineering. Then I worked for ~~Pulp and~~ PELTON Water Wheel. And we did the same thing over again. We would set up our machines, set up the lathe. Then you did a certaib thing - I don't remember. Itis kind of vague.

Cobble: Was it heavy machinery?

Sills: Yes. But they taught us how to handle heavy things. And I remember a little crane that you could use to slip something, a part, in place so that you could work at it. And it required some definite skills in terms of ability, aptitude.

Cobble: Did you ever feel like you weren't going to be able to handle the work?

Sills: No, I never did.

Cobble: Did you find that attitude from men that you were working with?

Sills: Well I remember - you see I used to work the swing shift and I remember Moffatt. Old Moffatt was a machinist and he lived up here on Twin Peaks. And a whole gang of us, after our shift, used to go up there and talk and drink and socialize. We got along very well with a lot of the men. And some of them we didn't have any relationship with at all. But Moffatt, I remember, was a real good guy.

Mostly if people were progressive in their outlook, if they knew something about what was going on in the world, we would develop a relationship. If they didn't, if they were only interested in women as such, you know, and socializing on a sexual basis, we weren't interested. I remember some of the bosses used to make passes at some of us, but we always handled that. We weren't interested in that type of relationship. We were interested in more serious things - political ideas and programs that we would like to see carried out. And we worked at it. It was a real part of our life.

I just have to tell you this one story although it probably has nothing to do with what you are after. But it keeps coming back into my mind. We were in New York, and the U.S.O., they used to get free tickets for all the shows, and we

Sills: Ben used to line up, and we saw all the best shows. Paul Robeson was playing in Othello in New York with Jose Ferrar and Uta Hagen, and there wasn't a ticket to be had. And I thought, I'm not leaving New York until I see Othello, Paul Robeson in Othello. And so I just kept pestering Ben. I said, "OK" - we knew somebody who was a good friend of his, just knew her casually, and we knew she was a good friend. We weren't real good friends.So I said you get on the phone and call Paul Robeson's office and tell him you are a good friend of so and so and see what happens. So he did, and his secretary said "You neglected to mention what night you wanted to go." So he gulped and I gulped, and he said, "Saturday night." They gave us third row on the aisle seats for the performance and they wouldn't hear of taking any money for it. And that was the most exciting marvelous production of Shakespeare that I ever saw in my life. I've never forgotten it. It stayed with me. It was that great. But I just had to tell you. [laughs] That's the kind of nuts we were. We did things like that.

Cobble: After the war you returned to working in the stores?

Sills: Yes. I developed a theory that if I worked in the stores amongst the rank and file that we would be able to make a lot more changes in the union. Well it didn't work out that way at all. As a matter of fact you become more isolated in a way from activity in the union - and the pressure from the employer on you while working on the job in various ways ~~became~~ becomes more of a hassle all the time. And with me what happened was - of course I was very careful to obey all the rules so I wouldn't be fired. But they found one way or another to get rid of me. It wouldn't be too long - say six months or a year. I think the

Sills: longest job I stayed on was at the Emporium. And some jobs were good jobs, but somehow or another my union record would catch up, who I was would catch up with me. I used my married name and not my maiden name, so they didn't know me. But it would catch up with me and I would be fired.

Cobble: Did you ever consider working in the union?

Sills: Maybe I thought about it. Maybe I wanted to,but I was never invited to nor was I ever [pause] I was kept out, and I was trying to remember how I was kept out. I think probably by my own attitude. I was always too far to the left. It wasn't important that you be in the leadership of the union. What was important is that you brought forth these ideas and these subjects and these political campaigns. That was what I concentrated on.

Cobble: It didn't matter how people reacted?

Sills: No, because they didn't know the truth. If they knew the truth and they got all the facts then they would be on our side. That's the way we handled it. And I think that was more or less why I never - you know I was my own worst enemy in terms of getting into leadership and probably being able to effect changes in that respect. It was really a separation in terms of my attitude. Of course I wasn't welcome either. Radical ideas were not welcome in the labor movement as well as within the business community or amy other community in our country.

Cobble: How were you affected by the Oakland general strike in '46? Did the union relate to that or give support to that?

Sills: I don't remember, unfortunately. I'm sure they did. I'm sure we related to that strike as being very important. We always supported Organized Labor We would never think of going through a picket line - any kind of picket line. And struggles

Sills: during those days were pretty much in tune with the aspirations of the working people as far as labor organizations were concerned. They only became separated later on as the unions became more affluent, really worked as a business organization more than a - efficiency, getting more money, just getting better conditions, and not having any relationship to the community at large. You know, each one going out for their own particular industry and not having any relationship to each other in terms of policy or in terms of a social movement. The same thing happened in the trade union movement that happens to any other movement in our vast country. It becomes split.

Cobble: Do you rememger when the ILWU warehousemen struck at Sears in '47 and asked the support of the Retail Clerks?

Sills: I don't remember what happened then. I'm sorry, I don't.

Cobble: That strike was eventually crushed by strikebreakers, seamen and teamsters.

Sills: I must have known all about it then, but I sure don't remember it.

Cobble: I have a few concluding questions. You were talking about working with the people in the department stores. How were the life styles of the people you worked with different than your own?

Sills: [pause] More circumscribed. The women would work, they would go home, they would take care of their houses. They would be interested in developing a social life. Much more traditional in terms of family and what they did and what they paid attention to. It was only certain issued that they would really become active on, in other words put any personal effort into.

Cobble: What kind of issues?

Sills: Anything that had to do with their union. They would attend the meetings and so on and so forth. Things like that. But other than that, the problems that they faced - were the everyday problems of living, of surviving took up all the time and effort of most women. And if you worked, particularly if you had children.

Cobble: You were asking for support around political issues? That was the main purpose -

Sills: There was a lot of argument and a lot of disagreement. And obviously they didn't agree on most things - because people are very nice, they are not going to say to your face, they just let it go by the boards. A lot of the women didn't even argue.

My whole effort was to try to get them into activity within the union on these political issues; to develop support for political issues. And that's what I spent my time and effort on. You know, the regular things one had to do. As I look back on it, boy you really became skilled at running a household, working, political activity. And your whole life was a constant go. And it was exciting, and it was good. I figure it was ~~the purpose~~ a purposeful life, ~~to~~ FOR me anyway.

Cobble: Where did you get support for your work? during those years?

Sills: We lived on very little money. Then one of my uncles decided he wanted to give his nieces and nephews some money before he died. And he gave ~~each~~ my sister and I, each ten thousand. So we used that to pay up debts. We were always in the hole, financially. Actually we were never very affluent. We paid off our debts. Then we decided to buy this house, put a down payment on it and buy a house. If it wasn't for that inheritance, we wouldn't have even had the wherewithall to buy a house.

Cobble: I was thinking of emotional support from other people, a kind of sustaining.

Sills: Oh yes. In the radical movement there was a strong feeling. This was my family. This was my community. Ohhh yes. It is one of the things that I miss most. And I think I was always envious of a large family and a close family. I didn't have it myself when I was a kid. And this became my family. Yes - a very close relationship with people, good friends and so forth over a long period of time.

Cobble: Was that a mixed group?

Sills: A mixed group - yes a mixed group. We had a lot of black friends we would see all the time.

Cobble: Did you go underground during the early -

Sills: No. I wasn't in any official position. I was in charge of some campaigns, and raising funds in different campaigns. I was never in a real official position.

Cobble: Looking back, how would you compare the trade union movement today with your union in the thirties?

Sills: Well I would say that it was much more in tune with the working population of this country in the thirties than it ever is today because today there is only a very small portion of the labor movement who still feels that their purpose is not only to raise the wages and improve the working conditions, but to also relate to some of the social issues that are plaguing our country and that are unsolved, and to work toward a solution to them. ~~Because they are much~~ Organized labor today is once again a bit more interested in political activities, but it ~~has become~~ is much more confined to the traditional parties and not to a true social change. In the thirties there was a vast feeling in the labor movement toward working for a change in our social system.

End first side of tape

Begin second side of Tape Six

Cobble: What is your attitude towards the women's movement today?

Sills: I am very interested in feminism, but I also see it as more of an elitist type of thing. And I believe that if men and women want to change, really change society in basic ways, that they are going to have to work together; that there shouldn't be any separation between men and women. I am all for women getting opportunity, but I would like to see the fragmentation that takes place in our society become a thing of the past; and where more groups, whether they are old or young, they're men or women, begin to work together on some of the basic social changes that have to be made. I don't think, until you do that, until there's a - I think it's happening. I think there's a gradual change taking place. There's an evolution that takes place. But what I'm saying is that there won't be any real changes until there's a political and social force that is strong enough and that has the support of the people, whether they're men, women, or children - you know, young people, and has the support of the population, the majority of the population.

And right now I see in our society a great section of our people, who live very well and don't want to rock the boat. They have good jobs and they have a good life, and - but I want to see this good life for everybody. And I think it's possible to have it for everybody because we have enough wealth and ability and brains in our society. But historically it's going to be a longer

Sills: process before this comes about. But I think it's taking place now, and I think the women who are fighting for their rights as feminists are helping to make that change. And that's a ~~good~~ good thing and I support it. I am not a part of the active feminist movement. I read - I subscribe to MS. I support (what's this group?) I have forgotten the name of it. There are a couple of groups -

Cobble: CLWU?*

Sills: CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women] and another group that is active.

Cobble: Union Wage?

Sills: Yes, Union Wage. I support all of their activity.

But I am more interested in - what I'm doing now. IT is working with seniors, and hoping - See, for the first time we are getting together on a statewide basis, trying to coalesce so that we are able to get together and support important issues like national health - a program for national health. On a statewide basis we are trying to change the inequitable ~~poo~~property tax so that the pressure of the cost of living is gradually equalized so that poor people don't have to pay so much and suffer so much because they - because most of their income is gone and they are trying to meet basic needs of all people, food, shelter and clothing. And I eventually hope to see the seniors get togehter - I hope to see all the different vast organizational things that are taking place now amongst different groups come together in some kind of organization that will be powerful enough to make changes.

Cobble: In what ways do you see the women's movement as being elitist?

Sills: Well, I see upper middle class and middle class women dominating. The vast majority of women who are working are not part of it.

Cobble: What was your attitude towards the women's movement or feminism as you perceived it in the thirties?

Sills: Women's rights. The same. The same problems. But it never became the dominant thing. The dominent thing was always more of a social movement, a reform movement.

Cobble: Do you think that organized labor today is more responsive to working women's needs?

Sills: You have to divide it. You can't say no, because women are becoming more active in the trade unions and where they are active new changes and new ideas are taking hold. In terms of the traditional, say the national organization, I see not much movement at all in this direction.

Cobble: I have a few more reflective questions about your life. What would you say was the most frustrating part of your work within unions?

Sills: [pause] To keep it open. To keep the union democratic. It was very difficult. Very difficult to keep it accessible to new ideas and new ways. Everything tends to stabilize and consolidate and to settle down to a status quo- particularly if it's good for those within the organization. And it's been good for the people who are in leadership. They have really done very well, exceptionally well in terms of their own lives, becoming very affluent just like a successful business organization. It's the same thing. The same thing has happened. A small percentage live very well. And the biggest frustration now as I look at the labor movement is that the leadership lives on a much higher scale than their rank and file does, and therefore it's ~~much~~ hard

Sills: to have a meeting of minds when things are good for one section and not so good for the other. The clash is there. It's true in the labor movement today. There is a separation and a difference amongst a lot of the rank and file.

Cobble: How did you struggle against that closing up of the labor movement?

Sills: It was new, you see, and when something is new, a new organization and new ideas have just ascended, taking the ascendency, it's much, much easier. But over a period of years it tends to happen to any institution, there's a lot of things that happen, like corrupt people, a lot of people with different ideas about what the labor movement should be. And it's very difficult for a membership that has to struggle with its own daily problems to be consistently active and be a watchdog on what's taking place. And if things get better for them they tend to relax and not participate. And this is what has happened. The rank and file don't participate.

Cobble: Did you have any allies within the union who were struggling with you to keep it democratic?

Sills: . Yes. There's always a section of the membership that is brighter and more attuned to change and more - I guess education plays a part in it too. Because I think the younger generation is a very bright generation. But I just wish they knew more of the history so they wouldn't make the same damn mistakes over again. You know this is a process and that's why I say it's going to take a lot longer than I ever dreamed it would take to make certain basic changes. And when you compare life in the United States amongst the vast majority of people in the United States

Sills: to what's happening in the rest of the world it is far superior in a lot of ways. It has a lot of bad things, but it also has a lot of good things to it. So that's what I mean in the thirties we thought more in black and white terms. There was good and bad, and this has eroded over the years and there are a lot more things happening now. And I think on the whole that there is terrific progress taking place throughout the whole world, but it's also a terrific struggle. And the outcome is by no means yet assured.

Cobble: You were talking about mistakes; that you wish the present generation wouldn't make the mistakes that you had made. What kind of advice do you give people now to avoid those mistakes?

Sills: To learn something about the real history of what took place. To really know what took place, and to discuss it and to think about it consciously. Certain things will apply now and certain things will not. I haven't got that type of mind that can be more specific, but generally speaking I think that they should know the history of our country better. I think this is one great lack.

Cobble: Did you ever have any direct confrontations with leadership?

Sills: Within my own union? Oh, yes. There was very hard feelings and our International union intervened on some issues to the extent of wanting to expel me. I always thought I was keeping it on a plane of principle versus just self interest as far as these particular officials were concerned. But I don't know - one lives with a lot of illusions [laughs]. Actually the results don't show that the principles had very much of a hold over the long run.

Cobble: Looking back, what parts of your life would you change if you could relive any part of your life?

Sills: Well, I always wished that I had tried when I was younger to get more formal education. I think that if you get it when you are young there are certain disciplines that develop from partaking of a formal education; certain ways of looking at the world, certain characteristics that develop from this experience that are very helpful in our kind of world. And that people respect and admire, you know, if you have it. Education, I think that was the one big thing that I would like to have changed because then you are allowed in our society to develop more skills. I always think of the fact that here I was in the last job that I held about eight years ago now [phone rings - tape stopped] 10

Cobble: What would you consider the most exciting, the most satisfying part of your work?

Sills: Experiencing growth, change, and feeling that you can do a lot more things that you never thought you could do just by being involved in this kind of a movement. I think that is very satisfying. To me everything I have learned is from life, experience itself. And that's very satisfying because (I don't know how to explain it) I think I've done a lot of things, a lot of different things in my life that I wouldn't have done if I hadn't been involved in this, you know the way I was in the labor movement. I never would have had any idea, you know, that organized labor existed. And it's sort of a well rounded, more or less. Limited but well rounded life. I would have liked to have done a lot of other things, but you know you are only one person.

Cobble: How have you felt about the interview process itself?

Sills: Oh, very good. I just wish that my memory hadn't been so poor; that I could have remembered a lot more incidents that happened that I feel would have been a contribution to this kind of a record. That's the only sad thing about it. Otherwise I think it's just wonderful that you're doing this, and I do hope that it helps in some way to contribute to an understanding of our history. History is very important, I think. It's wonderful that you're doing this.

Cobble: Thanks a lot, Marion.

Sills: You're very welcome.

Footnotes added by MBS after reading over the transcript.

[1]At the time, my ignorance regarding how a union was set up, how it functioned,etc., made it impossible for me to personally think about where I fit into the picture. I was so wrapped up in the excitement of everything taking place at once that I didn't realize that it would be most important for us to spend more time and go into more detail about who our officers should be. I now wonder who did decide these questions and if my youth and lack of experience and knowledge could have been the only reason I was chosen for Business Agent, the hired employee job. I also wonder if my openness to radical ideas, in any way influenced this decision.

[2]These were unions that wanted to see labor grow numerically and also grow in political influence by presenting new solutions to the social problems of the day.

[3]Also, they were an isolated group who held aspirations of moving out of the working class. Upward mobility was more possible then, especially for those who were also trying to continue their education. Perhaps this constituted the difference. Whether it was the main reason or not, it did contribute to their remaining unorganized.

[4]This moment I'll never forget because it bestowed a status of dignity to my life. Our organization had given me the power to effect and change the conditions under which I made my livlihood. Our organization could thereby influence and bring more justice and equality into the life of working people in our city.

[5]Probably the main reason why local 1100 gave up jurisdiction over groups in the department stores such as culinary workers, janitors, elevator operators, warehousemen, etc. was the fact that the craft union agreements did have much better wages and conditions in their own industries and could prove this fact in the course of negotiations. These unions wanted to represent our members and there must have been arguments and pressures that I can not recall. The record should show, however, that the unions supported each other and cooperated with each other.

[6]Anti-picketing ordinance was repealed when challenged during the Woolworth Warehouse Strike. Mass picketing had been prohibited and pickets were arrested, bailed out by the Labor Council, and then re-arrested. The Court case was decided after the Woolworth Warehouse Strike victory and was fought on the basis of a US Constitutional law that was repealed.

[7]I think now that 'nationalism' was the curse of both the US and the Soviet Union. The ends justify the means was predominate in foreign policy of both countries. Democracy in both countries was sidetracked in the rush of each country to prove itself superior and to win other countries as allies.

Footnotes continued

[8]If I remember correctly, this means that once a majority vote was taken on the Executive Board or negotiations committee, then all felt compelled to go along even if they disagreed. This was only the case when a contract was being considered. I guess that it was damn near impossible, to, in any practical way, to overturn a majority recommendation of this sort. Or at least, we thought so at the time.

[9]I think too many working people and retired people were inconvenienced by the strike without an explanation from the labor movement. People felt that labor was concerned only with the higher paid and already privileged workers, like the plumbers and carpenters. These workers were already getting much more money and better conditions than their co-union members who were working in private industry. For example: city workers in these trades got paid for a full years' work while in private industry, workers lose many days of pay because of rain, lay-offs between jobs, etc. Labor didn't explain the issues clearly and did a poor public relations job. People felt that the strikers didn't care about what happened to the community as a whole.

[10]An acquaintence of mine was in charge of planning, carrying out rental of units and managing this Foundation-sponsored housing for moderate and lower income people. City land in Diamond Heights was sold at a bargain price to the Maremont Foundation headquartered in Chicago. I was hired to do some general office work for this project. As work progressed, I became assistant to the Manager and whan she decided to leave, I was asked by Richard Bentley to take over managing the 285 units. I accepted on the basis that there would be a full-time bookkeeper under his direction who would handle the financial part of the job. Bentley was the executive director of Glenridge and another Maremont housing project in the East Bay (Richmond). I was in charge of keeping the rent records, renting units and supervising the maintenance department. I loved this job and worked on it for two years. Bentley was told that it was the best run project in the U.S. Morale was high, tenants happy and organized into a Tenant's Association. Even put out a community paper called 'POOR RICHARD'S ALMANAK'. Tenants also organized a child care nursery facility for working mothers living in Glenridge. I think it is still in operation. All went well until the Chicago office sent a man to take over the project. Without even a discussion with me, he proceeded to cut down on maintenance services. This brought on a confrontation with the Tenants and I was fired for being 'disloyal'. This meant that I was on the side of the tenants who wanted our project to remain the best and needed a good maintenance program to assist them. Subsequently, we learned that the Foundation milked this project in order to stay afloat elsewhere. The tenants fought well. They even enlisted the support of Mayor Alioto and at one time were even trying to buy the project and operate it as a cooperative. They were also able to keep the maintenance office available on a part-time basis. Just a month before I was fired, I received a big raise to $700 a month. This was the best paying job I ever held.

Additions: Questions submitted in writing and answered in writing by the interviewee after reading the first draft of the transcript.

I. Family Life and Growing Up

What kind of restrictions did your mother place on you when you were growing up? What things were forbidden?
Nothing that I can recall except that we were to be restricted in the matter of marriage. It must be someone of Jewish faith.

Were there other values beside social justice that were passed on to you from your mother?
Honesty, cleanliness, importance of friendship, appreciation of family relationships.

In what ways did your brother influence you? What values, if any, did you learn from him?
I think I must have envied him especially in regards to being independently self-sufficient.

You mentioned that there was no stigma attached to being poor in your early neighborhood; what about within your larger family group?
I was always treated kindly. Never aware of any stigma. Visits were few and far between with those mothers who had children and were financially well off. I saw a great deal of my aunt who had other children and of the one uncle who had a daughter our age and lived with us for quite awhile.

Could your mother read in Yiddish or in Russian?
No.

II. First Job and Initial Involvement in the Labor Movement

Q. How did your family react to your political activities? Did you get any advice or support from your mother, your sister, or your brother?
A. My mother was never aware of my political activities. All she knew was that I was never home and she resented this fact. My sister and brother also were involved with their own friends and activities and also weren't home very much. They knew about my politics but we didn't see each other enough to discuss anything at length.

Q. What do you think actually attracted you to that first union meeting? Were you just curious or what?
A. Curiosity was probably the main reason although I also must have been interested in the possibility of improving conditions on the job. Difficult to recall such feelings after all this time.

Q. How did you feel as one of the few women among so many men?
A. I must have given me a sense of power because I can't remember any negative feelings. It felt good to be a part of a growing labor movement and to hold a position of leadership in it. I can't remember ever thinking consciously about being one of the few women among so many men.

Q. Did the other women who were fired also become active trade unionists?
A. Yes, they were active in local 1100. Some were ON the Executive Board for many years, for as long as they kept working in the store.

III. Organizing and the First Contract

Q. Did you attempt to organize the stores that employed Chinese and Japanese? What were the special problems here and how were they solved?
A. We organized the National Dollar Stores. These stores hired chinese workers. There was never an attempt to organize Chinatown or any of the smaller Japanese stores. The reason was that we had our hands full coping with what we already had. Family owned stores weren't discussed.

Q. What did your work as a business agent entail?
A. Seeing that the contract was observed. Settling complaints. Collecting dues and signing up new employees.

Q. Was there any difference between the way the men and the women on the job accepted you as their business agent?
A. Not as I recall. Personality had a great deal to do with how you were accepted. Your record in settling complaints in favor of the members also counted heavily.

Q. Were there any differences between the older labor council members and the younger ones in terms of their attitudes toward you as a woman business agent?
A. I was accepted as part of the leadership of my union. All ages socialized and discussed our work constantly. It depended on the ideas that you held in common with each other, not age.

Q. How did older women (or men) react to such a young person handling their grievances?
A. We built our reputations on fighting for our members rights. We made the employer live up to the contract he signed. Age wasn't important or it didn't seem to be as far as I can recall.

Q. Did any members of the Clerk's International come to San Francisco? What kind of advice and support did you get from the International? You mentioned 'harassment' from the International, was it stronger during any one period or another? When were the conflicts the most intense?
A. We ran our own affairs quite independently for many years. My knowledge would be limited but I do know it took some time for the International to set up its bureaucracy and assert its will. My reputation as a radical was the basis for harassment and it grew stronger as the 'cold war' progressed culminating at its strongest point as anti-communist sentiment grew in the labor movement.

IV. Later Union Activities

Q. What other positions did you hold in the union such as labor council delegate, etc.?
A. Delegate to the San Francisco Labor Council and member of Labor Executive Committee.

Q. Do you think that being a 'woman's local' might have had any effect on the Teamsters's deciding to cross your picket lines?
A. No, I do not. I believe it was tied up with receiving extra benefits from employers if they crossed our line. Strictly a business proposition.

Q. How did the union involve the membership? Was there a fine for non-attendance of meetings? were there various committees like publicity, sports, etc.? Was any attempt made to develop leadership among women or minorities?
A. From the beginning, a steward's council composed of members working in the stores constituted the vital link between the officers and the members. Many activities such as dances, bowling, overnight ski trips were sponsored by the union. All necessary committees were made up of working members.

Q. What methods were used to bring non-union clerks into the fold?
A. Friendly and in some cases unfriendly persuasion were the main methods used and stewards and active members were the prime motivators for organizing . (The unfriendly tactic was social ostrazation).

Q. Was maternity leave ever discusses in negotiations or among the membership?
A. Not in my day.

Q. Where did the strikebreakers come from during the strikes? What attempts were made to deter them?
A. Personnel departments kept up-to-date applications from people wanting a job. Some may have also been friends of managers.

Q. Why didn't you ever consider running for a union office after your time as a business agent?
A. I had a rank and file complex and didn't believe I could be elected to anything other than Executive Committee. My radical politics were controversial and threatened my version of effective leadership. Not enough support for my ideas and how the union should be run. I also didn't want my personal life disrupted. The tug of war was always a question of either fulfilling one or the other ambition. My marriage took precedence as the most important part of my life and I was unable to reconcile the conflict.

V. Marriage and Family Life

Q. How did your mother or your family feel abour your living with Ben before you were married?
A. Never told them about it. He as a boarder living with a married couple and I was welcomed into their household.

Q. During this period a Judge Lindsey came forth with a bit on companionate marriage. Were you influenced by this or general discussions or did you and Ben come to the decision to live together solely on your own?
A. Solely on our own.

Q. What values did you feel it was important to impart to you daughter? How did yourppolitics affect the way you raised your daughter?
A. She was always included in our social and political activities, although never forced into any part of it. Her questions were answered always truthfully and our opinions weren't proselitzed. Freedom of choice and independence was a hall mark od our way of life. The included responsibility for her own mistakes. We allowed her always to choose which decision she felt was appropriate to each occasion when choice had to be made. We explained in a practical way what we thought possible consequences would be in a particular situation. The choice was hers to make. Joan's choices usually met with our approval. Family arguments were usually very low-key and infrequent. We tried to present as many opportunities as we possibly could for her to experience.

Q. Did you ever feel guilty for not being home more when your daughter was growing up?
A. No. I always believed in doing my own thing and could see that Joan was happily engaged with kids her own age while growing up. Any guilt feelings that existed centered around too limited choicesddue to financial limits.

Q. Did you ever have close women friends? Were these political friendships? What would you mainly talk about?
A. I had many close women friends centering on political and social activities. I had one woman friend I saw more often. She was divorced and had a daughter the same age as Joan. They were like sisters and went everywhere together. Cooking, poker games, sunbathing, week-end trips and dinner parties were great interests. Politics were what we agreed or argued about. You could say it was the glue that cemented our friendship. We still play scrabble together.

VI. Radical Activities

Q. Why dodyou think you became a radical?
A. Because I lived through a great period of change. I'm referring to the economic depression of the thirties; the upsurge of union organization, the spectacular social advances such as social security, unemployment insurance, welfare payments to those unable to find employment. I began to think about ,discuss and work for more fundamental changes that I thought would make possible an even better society, one with more equality of opportunity

for those of us who live on the lower economic levels. I just wanted more for the 'have nots' of this world and being a radical I thought was the only way to eradicate the deep and festering social problems of our times. I still believe that radical social changes are necessary and that there will never be peace in this world until economic slavery (whether its within a country's boundary or between different political and social communities) is totally eliminated.

Q. How did you become a member of the Communist Party?
A. I had many discussions with party members regarding membership. I was impressed with the dedications, knowledge and ideas expressed especially when discussion concerned how the Trade Union Movement could become the leader in solving the social problems like unemployment, poor education, poormedical care, etc. and how the labor movement all over the world could be the leader for peace in the world. I felt flattered to be asked to join this group of such outstanding leaders and considered it an honor to join with them in the struggle for a better world.

Q. What kind of help did you receive from the Communist Party in your union activities?
A. Supportive. Any efforts on my part to further the education regarding the important political issues were encouraged. We were also encouraged to work on specific resolutions to be adopted by our union.

Q. Were there many other radicals in the union? Did you function as a caucus?
A. Yes, we always had a few members who met as a caucus to discuss problems of the union and work on figuring out how to solve them.

Q. Did you usually agree with the policy changes in the Communist Party over the years? For example, how did you react to the Soviet-Nazi Pact? Were there ever any times when it was difficult for you to follow party decisions? What did you do about it?
A. Yes, I usually agreed with the policy changes. On the Soviet-Nazi pact, we were absolutely flabbergasted. It seemed inconceivable to me at the time -- I couldn't explain it but I did say that there must be important reasons for it that we were unaware of. "Winning time to build their own defenses" was one of the excuses I felt was justified. Especially after the U.S. and Britain refused to join the Soviets in a pact against the Nazis. There were many times that I felt unable to genuinely support the Party positions. I didn't speak out and argue the points I disagreed with within the Party. I always felt that my ideas were inferior to those expressed by the intellectuals of the Party. They were so much more knowledgable that I was. I then just skipped the issue altogether.

Q. How did being a Marxist help or hinder you in your work?
A. Being a Marxist stimulated me personally. It helped me develop some creative ideas on how to live my life. It presented challenges and alternatives

ways of doing things. In the union work itself, I allowed myself to become isolated mainly on the basis that I was alwasy right and everyone else just didn't understand. I look on it now as an "arrogance born of ignorance". After the war, there was a great upsurge in reponsiveness to political ideas. We had defeated the Nazis and the fascists and hopes were high for a better world.